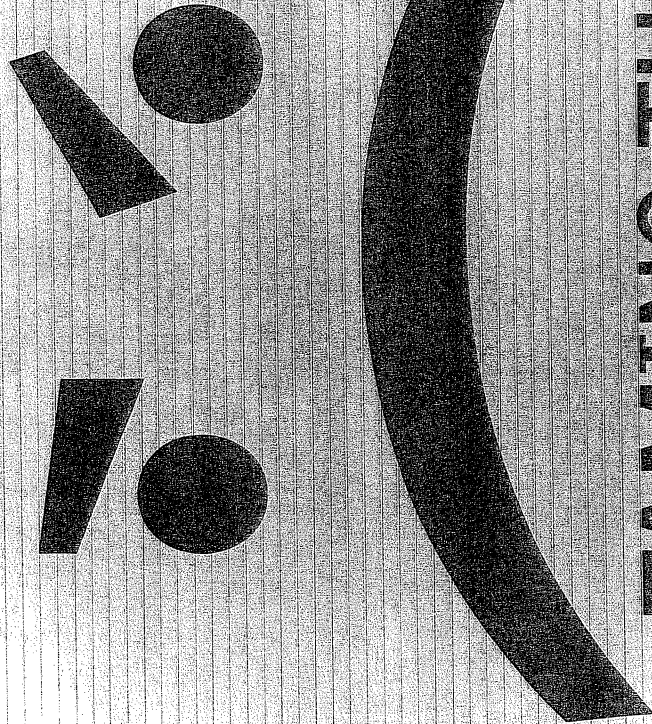


Books

InQuotes

"I imagine my future as a great romance. I have read too much Hemingway and not enough Dostoyevsky."
— BILL BARRICH, REMEMBERING HIMSELF AT 20

SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS | DECEMBER 31, 2000



REVIEWED

THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION: Making Computers Human-Centric
By Michael Dertouzos
HarperBusiness, 240 pp., \$26

By Paulina Barsnok

Michael Dertouzos, director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Laboratory for Computer Science, seems a nice man — there's a gentle down-to-earth sensibility that pervades his writing. Unfortunately, that doesn't mean he's written a book that's much worth reading.

"The Unfinished Revolution" is a bit like that article Sun Microsystems celebrity scientist Bill Joy wrote on the dangers of technology in "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us," a long article in the April issue of *Wired*. Joy worried that new technologies — robotics, nanotechnology and genetic engineering — could destroy the distinctiveness of humanity. There was little new in that piece — others have written about technology's unintended consequences more deeply and years earlier — but there was novelty, and even perhaps value, in having a high-profile technology practitioner do the explaining in a mainstream publication. "The Unfinished Revolution" is an exercise

TAMING THE USER-HOSTILE COMPUTER

MIT guru **Michael Dertouzos** offers some not-new-enough ideas about how to achieve better living through technology

along the same lines. Dertouzos outlines the problems that have dogged computer science for decades: that it's all been engineered by and for engineers and for the way machines work, and not for the way people really work and think; that software is ever more buggy and overly complex, suffering from future-creep and over-automation; that the information you really want can't be found easily; that computers in general are often unreliable, counterintuitive and annoying (or engaging). He also touches on data smog, the catch phrase for an information glut that overwhelms a human's capacity.

— See COMPUTERS, Page 17

SO LONG '00

Page 3 A plenitude of anthologies | The year in non-fiction Page 5

PAULINA BARSNOK, who lives in Santa Cruz, is the author of *Cyberself: A Critical*

Cover review and Calendar

COMPUTERS | Making machines more human

CYBER AUTHOR FINDS ANSWERS TO TECHNOLOGY'S PROBLEMS IN — SURPRISE! — MORE TECHNOLOGY

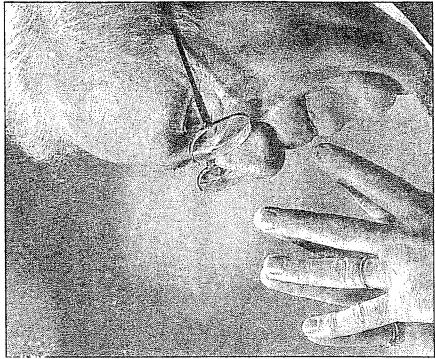
Continued from page 1

processors will make our lives easier! We'll all be like information kindergarteners endlessly cutting, pasting and tagging information, and we'll lead richer, fuller lives!

Oh, yeah? Isn't the microprocessor or the software added to a car, radio, coffee maker or stove the very thing that makes it break down? Be erratic? Unfixable? Dertouzos is a computer-scientist, so it's understandable that he sees the answer to today's user-unfriendly computer science as residing in more computer science. Just as to a hammer, everything is a nail, and to a heart surgeon, everyone needs a bypass.

One of the most unwittingly telling scenarios Dertouzos writes about comes from medicine. In this "Unfinished Revolution" dramatization, intelligently communicating software and virtual-reality setups will make doctors more productive through better collections of laboratory tests and analysis. (Think of those medical devices common to "Star Trek: The Next Generation.") But most doctors and patients don't complain that it takes too long to get test results. Instead they complain that because of the productivity demands of managed care, doctors don't get to spend enough time with patients to discuss symptoms, problems, medical histories and alternatives. This is what impedes diagnosis and healing, not delayed test re-

sults. Ever the computer scientist, Dertouzos assumes that the bottlenecks in our lives come from not getting the right data faster. While Dertouzos pays homage to the idea



REAY STEINBERGER — REUTERS

Michael Dertouzos writes of the same computer problems and solutions others have written about since the 1980s.

that humans will always do some things better than machines, and that humans have dimensions to their consciousness and expertise that cannot be input on a spreadsheet, in almost none of his prognostications does he display any deep understanding of the point of view he says he holds. In this regard, "The Unfinished Revolution" reads a little too much like a Laboratory for Computer Science brochure for potential donors rather than a deep and novel consideration of how to make technology more human-centric.

Dertouzos is correct, though, in pointing out that issues such as privacy need to be dealt with by governments and not technologists — that is, that adequate privacy technology already exists. The problem lies instead with high tech's rabid free-market fundamentalists who abjure government regulation and would see any crimp in their incursions into unauthorized data collection as nanny-state, anti-capitalist abominations.

In summary, if you've been around high tech more than a few years, you've heard Dertouzos-like tales-of-the-near-future more new to high tech, his version of the reassurance that goes "we computer scientists have been bad, but we're going to get better, we promise" constitutes a perennially unreliable narrative.

Literary Calendar

To include an event in Literary Calendar, send announcements at least three weeks in advance to Greg Young, Literary Calendar, Mercury News, 750 Ridder Park Drive, San Jose, Calif. 95190, gyoung@sjmercury.com or fax (408) 271-3786

SIGNINGS AND EVENTS

- Wednesday**
 Peter Meyer, "Warp Speed Growth," 7:30 p.m., Capitola Book Cafe, 1475 41st Ave., Capitola, (831) 462-4415.
- Thursday**
 Phillip McGraw, "Life Strategies: Doing What Works, Doing What Matters," 7:30 p.m., Book Passage, 51 Tantal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera, (415) 927-0960.
 Jay McGraw, "Life Strategies for Teens," 7:30 p.m., Book Passage, 51 Tantal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera, (415) 927-0960.

- Friday**
 Andy Ferguson, "Zeni's Chinese Heritage: The Masters and Their Teachings," 7 p.m., Oakland Museum of California, 10th and Broadway St., Oakland, (415) 462-4415.

Women's Open Mic, Third Saturday of each month, 6-8 p.m., Sisterspirit Bookstore, 938 The Alameda, San Jose, (408) 293-9372.

UPCOMING

- Jan. 8**
 Ronna Lichtenberg, "It's Not Business, It's Personal," 5:30 p.m., Book Passage, 51 Tantal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera, (415) 927-0960.
- Jan. 9**
 John Copeland, "Retribution," 7:30 p.m., Capitola Book Cafe, 1475 41st Ave., Capitola, (831) 462-4415.
 Ilana Rubinfeld, "The Listening Hand: Self-Healing Through the Rubinfeld Synergy Method of Talk and Touch," 7:30 p.m., Book Passage, 51 Tantal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera, (415) 927-0960.

- Jan. 10**
 Olive Matson, "Let the Crazy Child Write! Finding Your Creative Writing Voice," 5:30 p.m., Book Passage, 51 Tantal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera, (415) 927-0960.

Jan. 12
 Increase Creativity While You Sleep," 7:30 p.m., Book Passage, 51 Tantal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera, (415) 927-0960.

Jan. 13
 Irwin Gootnick, "Why You Behave in Ways You Hate," 7:30 p.m., Book Passage, 51 Tantal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera, (415) 927-0960.

Jan. 14
 Jonathan Nasaw, "The Girls He Adored," 6 p.m., The San Francisco Mystery Bookstore, 4175 24th St., (415) 282-7444.

Jan. 15
 Dan Beesie, "Rare Birds: An American Family," 7:30 p.m., Book Passage, 51 Tantal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera, (415) 927-0960.

Jan. 17
 John Stauber, "Trust Us We're Experts: How Industry Manipulates Science and Gambles on Your Future," 7:30 p.m., Capitola Book Cafe, 1475 41st Ave., Capitola, (831) 462-4415.

Jan. 18
 Thomas Scoville, "Silicon Follies: A dot com Comedey," 7:30 p.m., Capitola Book Cafe, 1475 41st Ave., Capitola, (831) 462-4415.

Haight St., San Francisco, (415) 863-8688.

Jan. 27
 Martin J. Smith, "Shadow Image," noon. The Cara Black, "Murder in Belleville," noon. The San Francisco Mystery Bookstore, 4175 24th St., (415) 282-7444.

Jan. 29
 Chip Conley, "The Rebel Rules," 7:30 p.m., Jan. 29 Book Passage, 51 Tantal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera, (415) 927-0960.

Jan. 30
 Barry Hansen, "Rhino's Cruise Through the Blues," 7 p.m., Jan. 30, The Booksmith, 1644 Haight St., San Francisco, (415) 863-8688.

READ THE BOOK

DIANETICS

CALL NOW 800.600.6241