

A REVIEW OF GILES SLADE'S *MADE TO BREAK: TECHNOLOGY AND OBSOLESCENCE IN AMERICA*

by Elizabeth McDonough

Have you ever replaced a cell phone even though it was perfectly functional? Perhaps you've made a significant purchase driven by aesthetic appeal instead of function? You are not alone. As a caucasian woman in her early thirties who has spent most of her adult life in the United States, I too am guilty of making similar choices. I often fall victim to the allure of attaining the latest and greatest.

When I reflect on this type of decision-making, it brings questions to mind:

“Why do we have such fleeting relationships with the products we consume?”

“Why are we conditioned to consume in this way?”

My quest to understand the historical context behind these complicated questions undoubtedly influenced my decision when choosing a book to review. After perusing the first few pages of *Made to Break Technology and Obsolescence in America* by Giles Slade, I was hooked.

Obsolescence is defined as the process of becoming obsolete or outdated and no longer used.<sup>1</sup> In this book, Slade examines the history of the United States through the lens of obsolescence, from the Industrial Revolution up until the book's publishing in 2006. We are introduced to several phases of this practice until we're met with the unruly, complex, influential system we face today.

At the start, Slade provides an engaging historical account of the birth of the term. He explains how, in the late 1800's and early 1900's, the practice of product obsolescence became an established cornerstone in the production of physical goods. Businesses began to understand that consumers were willing to trade form for function and they capitalized upon this by releasing routine variations of existing products. In doing so, many established a reliable cadence of consumption by “innovating” their products through aesthetic modification.

Slade explains how the success of this practice built the foundation for its counterpart, planned obsolescence. This new form hinged upon the ability to not just encourage, but to engineer a product's life cycle. To put it simply, products were now **made to break**.

The focus then shifts to an examination of obsolescence in its more abstract forms. Slade introduces the idea of human obsolescence that emerged during World War 2. At the time, there was a palpable anxiety that humans would make themselves obsolete through the reckless use of nuclear warfare. Eventually, it became possible to describe people's knowledge and training as victims of obsolescence due to the rapid development of new technologies.

On this journey through history, Slade initially weaves a compelling fact-driven narrative about the emergence and advancement of this practice. He moves quickly through time sharing a multitude of compelling facts with brevity and enthusiasm. However, while he successfully provides a historical account of the change agents that caused this practice to flourish, the way in which the information is presented could use some zest. The language and tone of his work becomes rather prosaic and the momentum that drew me in at the beginning fades by the middle of Chapter 4.

It's clear that Slade found it easier to identify the structure behind the initial timeline as his slowing pace presents itself in tandem with his discussion of the more abstract forms. Perhaps the transition into an increasingly haphazard writing style was a result of the society he was documenting. I imagine it became harder to isolate clear moments of cause and effect as the system progressed, therefore impacting his ability to tactfully communicate simplified milestones.

Further, as the clarity begins to deteriorate, his ability to remain unbiased also declines. This bias is front and center in the final chapter when Slade expands on his pessimistic view of the future, which I can certainly empathize with. I appreciate his honesty and I am aligned in his fear for where we're headed with our throwaway culture in tow.

While my connection to his stance was one positive takeaway, I also enjoyed how Slade made it a priority to provide short biographies for each individual we meet in the book. The additional context helped paint a picture of each person and allowed me to establish a connection with them outside of their affiliation with the storyline. That said, it would be nice if there was some levity injected

into his accounts to help balance the antagonism that was front and center for the main stakeholders.

Overall, this book met my expectations and empowered me with the answers I was seeking. It's not lighthearted and there are no visual elements to stimulate beyond the written word, but if you are someone who is purely looking for answers, you will find them here.

Before embarking on this journey, the extent of my knowledge started and ended with the assumption that Apple was to blame for product obsolescence. While they certainly perpetuate it, they cannot be held accountable for its creation. Going one step beyond that, I don't think we can solely blame any particular business involved in this cycle. While they may utilize what one might describe as psychological warfare, this practice is the result of a relationship between us as consumers and the products we consume.

**We still have the power of choice.**

## CITATIONS

1. "Lexico." *Lexico*, 2021,  
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