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Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America
(review)

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good criticism includes but goes well beyond a focus on the inherent qualities of a single speech itself, but includes context, timing, institutional setting, and the interaction with external factors such as other institutions and the political system as a whole. It is an interesting and innovative addition to the literature on presidential rhetoric and the rhetorical presidency, and is a useful example of how rhetorical criticism and institutional analyses can be profitably combined.

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Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America. By Giles Slade. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006; pp. 336. \$27.96 cloth.

Giles Slade, a Canadian-born freelance writer and journalist, closes his introductory remarks for *Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America* with a question of cultural legacy: “If human history reserves a privileged place for the Egyptians because of their rich conception of the afterlife, what place will it reserve for a people who, in their seeming worship of convenience and greed, leave behind mountains of electronic debris?” (7). The electronic debris to which he refers is the product of our cultural tendency to discard functioning technology at an unprecedented rate. Slade focuses on the issue of planned obsolescence and the machinations that made it what it is today. Using historical texts and rhetoric from key events and figures in American history, Slade weaves a compelling chronology of planned obsolescence as a phenomenon and its implications for the global environment.

Slade defines planned obsolescence as “the assortment of techniques used to artificially limit the durability of a manufactured good in order to stimulate repetitive consumption” (5). This concept was given a formal name in 1928, but Slade demonstrates that the idea was subtly fostered as early as the late 1800s. Since that time, variations of planned obsolescence have made their mark on the American economy. Slade explores the role of obsolescence in advertising, economic strategies, corporate power struggles, and even Cold War espionage. The chapters chronicle a series of historical events that triggered, defined, and perpetuated this now common practice.

Chapters 1 and 2 link the early development of manufacturing to the concept of repetitive consumption. Slade explains the issues of demand and distribution related to overproduction faced by American manufacturers and retailers, which brought about innovations in branding, advertising, and product development. Hygienic products, such as the disposable razor, broke ground in the United States by planting the seeds of “the cultural acceptance of the throwaway ethic, a necessary accompaniment to planned obsolescence” (23). In

chapter 2, Slade examines the competition between Ford and General Motors as a seminal event in American history that encouraged product obsolescence with the annual model change.

Throughout chapter 3, the rhetoric of influential figures in advertising is used to illustrate the increased corporate acceptance of obsolescence as a legitimate and necessary business practice. Slade quotes numerous passages from 1930s economists endorsing obsolescence as a means to sustain the American economy. Chapter 4 is a dramatic retelling of the struggle between two influential men in the broadcasting industry. Advances in broadcast technology and the invention of miniaturization result in the first disposable pocket radios. Slade notes that at this point in history, "product life spans were no longer left to chance but were created by plan" (113).

The invention of nylon, electronic calculators, the atomic bomb, and the resulting public backlash dominate chapters 5 and 6. To illustrate the sense of how public intellectuals were raising awareness of these issues, Slade draws upon the seminal works of Norman Cousins, Vance Packard, and Marshall McLuhan to provide additional context to the increasingly widespread cultural understanding of advertising and media use in planned obsolescence. The invention and proliferation of microchips provide the foundation for chapter 7. Slade mentions e-waste, in connection with the disposable electronic calculator, for the first time since the introduction.

Chapter 8 departs from the consumer- and corporate-driven practices of technological obsolescence. Slade goes into detail about the shrewd use of planned obsolescence as a key component of American superiority during the Cold War. He provides an engrossing tale of industrial espionage targeted at bringing Russia to financial ruin. Although effective, Slade also points out irreversible environmental damage caused by these subversive tactics.

Cellular telephone technology and its resulting e-waste dominate the final chapter. Slade draws upon Colin Campbell's research to provide insight into the individual's insatiable need for the newest and most stylish cell phone technology. He concludes with the impact of e-waste on the international community and a call for improved consumer understanding of the global effects of technology consumption. This last chapter is an appropriate conclusion to Slade's historical overview. It provides the reader with a relatable technology (cell phones), and goes into greater depth about the environmental issues he presents in his introduction. Slade's introduction indicates more focus on the environment than is actually paid throughout the subsequent chapters. With the exception of chapters 5, 8, and 9, little mention is made of related environmental issues. A more pronounced connection to the environment may have provided the reader with a more consistent reminder of his thesis.

Slade uses this book to deliver some jarring environmental statistics, which have the desired effect on the reader. What are we going to do with the ever-increasing products of consumer technology waste? How did we get ourselves into this mess in the first place? Why is it that the typical individual is unaware of this looming global catastrophe? What is the corporate, consumer, and government responsibility in all of this? Slade does not provide concrete answers for all of the questions he raises, but he does provide an effective historical summary of planned obsolescence and relates it to a series of suggestions and inevitabilities that he sees technological consumer culture affecting.

The subject matter and introduction might suggest a lengthy condemnation of American consumer culture and all its related evils. However, Slade takes a more analytical approach. The historical overview is a fascinating read. Slade ably constructs a chronological narrative and employs a variety of historical rhetoric to paint a vivid picture for the reader. The various examples are balanced in their representation of consumer, corporate, governmental, and academic perspectives, making the approach well rounded and stimulating. His conclusion does not attempt to lay the blame at any specific doorstep. Instead, Slade makes a pragmatic appeal for the inevitable change in our manufacturing and general consumer understanding of technology that would follow increased consumer awareness along with systemic corporate manufacturing changes reflecting the need for green design practices. It is important to note that Slade does not give American corporate and consumer culture a pass. The corporate, consumer, and governmental roles are examined fairly but not harshly. Slade seems to recognize that blame and finger-pointing will be ineffectual in galvanizing people into action. He asserts that only through equal awareness and action from consumers, corporations, and the government will we be able to address this issue effectively.

Communication scholars will find this work engaging and thought-provoking. Slade exhibits a talent for historical writing with broad appeal, making this book ideal for undergraduates and above. It provides fertile ground for discussion and incorporates a wide array of historical texts, from nineteenth-century disposable razorblade advertisements to personal memoirs of Cold War espionage, for example. Slade also provides valuable insight into the more complex examples, improving the reader's understanding while maintaining her attention. Most importantly, Slade delivers a valuable message that will lead readers to examine some of their own consumption practices.

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