Vignettes: Sportstech

Such sports as mountaineering, sailing, skiing, scuba diving as well as traditional bat-and-ball games have all been subject to technological improvement. Whether these advances have added to the pleasure derived from such activities may be doubted and it is also doubtful if they have had any beneficial effects outside the individual sports in question. Sports technology does not seem to be a strategic technology.

—*Donald Cardwell*, in *The Norton History of Technology* (Norton)

Let me . . . make this modest proposal: an artificial indoor ski area in downtown Los Angeles. What would it look like? You may have seen in a sporting goods store the moving carpets that are mounted like large tilted conveyor belts and allow a skier to ski down the incline so that the skis sliding down and the carpet moving up roughly balance and, to a stationary observer, the skier stays in place. In addition to boots, skis, and poles, the skier is given a pair of goggles (skiers are used to these) where the lens is replaced by two microtelevision screens. The rest of the story tells itself. We play on those screens moving scenes of ski slopes that are coordinated with the varying speed and pitch of the conveyor belt carpet. Everything else is a matter of technological refinement: blowers to simulate the rushing of the wind, a harness to suspend the wayward or crashing skier, and more. And let me briefly extol the virtues of the new kind of skiing, the reduction of gasoline consumption and automobile pollution, the infinite variety of conditions and terrains, the instant, continuous, and wide availability of skiing, and the supreme safety of the sport.

—*Albert Borgmann*, in *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction* (Michael E. Soulé and Gary Lease, Eds.; Island Press)

closely identified with the moral character that entitled scientists to that professional autonomy which has allowed systems of peer review to flourish in most walks of scientific life. In the 19th century the ammeter or the calculating machine could be seen to pose a threat against this still budding self-sufficiency, because these devices seemed to dislocate mastery over nature and control over the values of precision from the scientist to the manufacturer of instruments.

Why, then, has precision had such a strong impact on Western culture? At the end of the book, Wise addresses this interesting question, and he rightly points to a general tendency to pursue *unity*, apparent also for example in the centralization of nation states and international commerce. Wise sees scientific conventions, such as standards, as both "agents of unity and products of agreement." This is in fact how scientists at the turn of the century liked to view the matter: international commerce and international science would create unity between nations and ensure peace. But history has corrected that optimistic view. Several essays in this book do in fact emphasize that unity and agreement on standards often emerge only after acrimonious disputes. Therefore, when unity has been achieved someone has lost out; the smooth surface of standardized science also hides the ragged edges of discontent.

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