

David Cotterrell: londonblog.com : War, what is it good for?

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Exhibitions, if nothing else.

I popped down to War+Medicine today, the latest temporary exhibition at Wellcome Collection.

It is an experience filled with potent imagery. Take Theatre, the opening film by artist David Cotterrell, for example. On entering a darkened room, I took a low seat close to the back. Projections on the far wall create the illusion that I'm on the floor of an RAF Hercules as its crew and medics go about their business. The footage is from a training exercise in Afghanistan a simulation of a simulation. But the effect is deeply immersive. The waist-high point-of-view and muting of conversation by the four propeller engines of the Hercules give a feeling of aloofness, as though I'm an injured soldier propped up against the fuselage. This is a virtual reality, and not a pleasant one.

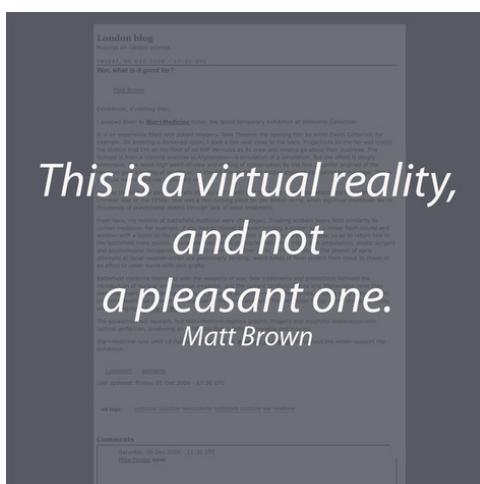
Beyond the film, the exhibition tells the story of health and medicine on the battlefield, starting with the Crimean War of the 1850s. This was a real turning point for the British Army, when logistical ineptitude led to thousands of preventable deaths through lack of basic treatment.

From here, my notions of battlefield medicine were challenged. Treating soldiers bears little similarity to civilian medicine. For example, if you had to choose between helping a soldier with a minor flesh wound and another with a bullet to the hip, you might treat the former in preference to the latter, so as to return him to the battlefield more quickly. Those who need more protracted attention might face amputation, plastic surgery and psychological recuperation all topics covered in other parts of the exhibition. The photos of early attempts at facial reconstruction are particularly striking; weird tubes of flesh stretch from chest to cheek in an effort to cover burns with skin grafts.

Battlefield medicine coevolves with the weapons of war. New treatments and protections followed the introduction of nuclear and chemical weapons, and the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan raise their own challenges. Roadside blasts account for many of the injuries to allied forces. Modern body armour often prevents death, but gives little protection to the limbs and face. The exhibition brings home this grim reality, with photographs such as this.

The squeamish will squeam, but War+Medicine deploys graphic imagery and insightful explanation with tactical perfection, producing an exhibition that is both memorable and moving.

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