

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

network.nature.com

Date: 5th December 2008

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, forexample. On entering a darkened room, I took a low seat close to the back. Projections on the far wall createthe illusion that Im on the floor of an RAF Hercules as its crew and medics go about their business. Thefootage is from a training exercise in Afghanistana simulation of a simulation. But the effect is deeplyimmersive. The waist-high point-of-view and muting of conversation by the four propeller engines of theHercules give a feeling of aloofness, as though Im an injured soldier propped up against the fuselage. This isa virtual reality, and not a pleasant one.

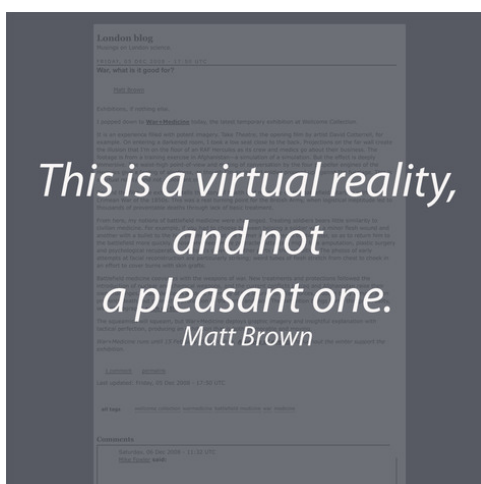
Beyond the film, the exhibition tells the story of health and medicine on the battlefield, starting with theCrimean War of the 1850s. This was a real turning point for the British Army, when logistical ineptitude led tothousands of preventable deaths through lack of basic treatment.

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

Battlefield medicine coevolves with the weapons of war. New treatments and protections followed theintroduction of nuclear and chemical weapons, and the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan raise theirown challenges. Roadside blasts account for many of the injuries to allied forces. Modern body armour oftenprevents 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 withtactical perfection, producing an exhibition that is both memorable and moving.

Matt Brown
06 Dec 2008



Web Page Layout Credit: Matt Brown (2008)