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War + Medicine

Wellcome Collection, London, UK



David Cotterrell, *Ambulance* (2008)

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Published on 10/12/08
by *Eliza Williams*

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Presented as part of 'War + Medicine' at the Wellcome Collection, David Cotterrell's five-channel video installation, *Theatre* (2008) offers a glimpse into a military world that is usually hidden from view. The film is screened across three walls, in which the viewer is placed, appropriately enough, in the position of fourth wall. *Theatre* appears to document the evacuation of a number of wounded soldiers from a war zone, including one who is seriously injured and lying on a stretcher hidden beneath medical paraphernalia. With the loud engine noise obscuring any speech between the soldiers and medical staff, the journey appears calm and methodical, and is compelling, in spite of its lack of action.

As its title suggests though, the film is in fact a reconstruction of the last day of training for evacuation crews before they are deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. In a three-channel work by Cotterrell, *9-Liner* (2008), a film of a genuine evacuation is shown. Despite its jerky camera work, the systematic approach displayed by the soldiers in *Theatre* is still evident, enhanced by two additional screens that document the journey from different perspectives: one shows the progress of the patient's flight in scrolling code; the other follows the watchkeeper, a soldier who monitors computer screens from an office. The result is an abstracted vision of an injury, far removed from the circumstances in which it was sustained.



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David Cotterrell, *Red Cross Tent* (2008)

This cool analysis of the horrific consequences of war recurs throughout 'War + Medicine', with the exhibition placing an emphasis on the medical discoveries and advances that have come as a result of warfare. Cotterrell's films, which were commissioned by the Wellcome Trust, are shown amongst a collection of intriguing objects and art works that stretch back to the mid-19th century. The emphasis is largely on the aftermath of conflict, and on the treatment and rehabilitation of those injured, with images of severely scarred soldiers appearing alongside some of the implements that were used to treat them.

A final section of the exhibition concentrates on the effects of war upon the mind, an area that neatly loops back to Cotterrell's works. In a film on the Wellcome Collection's website, Cotterrell talks at length about his experiences in Afghanistan. He emphasizes the distances, both physical and mental, between where an injury is sustained and the systems of rehabilitation found in the civilian world, of which the flights recorded in his films (real or simulated) provide a bridge. Cotterrell's films provide an insight into this military environment, as well as to some of its methods and techniques, but perhaps only as much as the medical artefacts elsewhere in the exhibition give access to historical conflicts. Instead of revealing the harsher realities of warfare, the medical teams give order to the chaos and tragedy of war, keeping any sense of confusion or disarray out of sight, if not out of mind.

Eliza Williams

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