

How does television treat art? A programme on war art shows what happens when a celebrity presenter is allowed a free hand – and makes a lot of mistakes. Here, art historian Jan Cox shows how the well-known journalist Jon Snow got it wrong.

The Art of War: more damp squib than rocketing success?

Jan Cox

Jon Snow's take on *The Art of War* in the Channel Four series *The Genius of British Art* was acceptable, in the words William Boot is obliged to use in Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop*, 'up to a point, Lord Copper'. The whole six-part series, broadcast in an early Sunday evening slot in the autumn of 2010, reinforced the view that a programme is far more likely to be commissioned if 'celebrity presenter' can replace 'knowledgeable presenter.' (Others were Janet Street-Porter and Griff Rhys Jones: who could complain?) Jon Snow's highly personal selection was broadcast on 7 November. He chose to juxtapose the work of four long-dead artists, C.R.W. Nevinson, Paul Nash, Stanley Spencer and Henry Moore, with that of three living ones, John Keane, Jeremy Deller and Steve McQueen. So far, so good. On reflection though, it seems that any Waughian 'questing vole' would pick substantial holes in Snow's presentation.

I must confess that few people can surpass my enthusiasm for Nevinson's art of the First World War. It is modern, evocative, and finely coloured, and each picture is well-constructed and beautifully balanced. However, I blanched at Snow's unequivocal assertion that Nevinson was 'the most radical, the most controversial artist of his generation'. It would be very difficult to argue that Nevinson's work was more radical than that of Lewis, Wadsworth and their fellow Vorticists in *Blast*. Similarly, there was very little emphasis on the fact that much of the controversy around Nevinson was self-generated; no mention was made of the significant influence of his father, the journalist Henry Nevinson, who campaigned on behalf of his son throughout the whole war.

The opening of Snow's programme seemed strangely familiar. Cue choirboys, school assemblies spent gazing at stirring images, and the boys themselves as the next generation of soldiers

sent to battle. John Bulmer's 1984 film on Keith Vaughan opens in exactly the same way, set in Christ's Hospital School in Sussex, as opposed to Winchester Cathedral where Snow was a choral scholar. (Coincidentally, Christ's Hospital is only a dozen miles away from Ardingly College, where Snow grew up; his father, the Rev. George D'Oyly Snow, was headmaster between 1947 and 1961.) The introduction to Bulmer's film, with its clever juxtaposition of a school band and a platoon of 'Tommies' marching to military music, is far more evocative than Snow's reminiscences of gazing at statues of military heroes of Sevastopol and the Somme.

Aesthetic considerations aside, Snow had a very clear agenda. 'At first [Nevinson] bought in to the Futurist vision of war as "beautiful ideas that kill," but 'ill-health brought him back to Britain a changed man [...] and his paintings changed too.' This easy-to-grasp concept was illustrated by the 'serendipitous pairing' of the 'before' and 'after' images: *Column on the March* (1915) and *La Patrie* (1916) – a clear contrast between Nevinson's attitude of 'bring it on', exemplified by his depiction of 'a mighty modern killing machine', and his later disillusionment at 'the shrieks, the gangrene, the disembowelled'. This 'pairing' occurred because both images are at Birmingham City Art Gallery and could conveniently be displayed together. A similar earlier work he might have utilised, *Returning to the Trenches* (1914) – far more vibrant and rhythmical, as well as better-known – is tucked away in the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. As a prestigious British curator explained in response to my protestations at James Fox's lamentable programme on *The Art of Cornwall*: 'It all comes down to money and simplicity. [...] Factual accuracy and detail seem not to be too important to TV'.

Column on the March (1915) – there is an earlier chalk and watercolour sketch (c. 1914; Imperial War Museum) – and *La Patrie* (1916) are both based on Nevinson's experiences in France between November 1914 and January 1915 (he didn't return there until July 1917), and cannot therefore be representative of a 'before' and 'after' scenario. Snow picked *Column on the March* as one of 'the 10 best British artworks about war' (*The Observer*, 31 October 2010, *The New Review*, p. 6) and described it as a 'sensational picture', a truly personal choice when one considers that Michael Walsh doesn't deem it worthy of a single mention among the ninety Nevinson works of 1911-1919 that he discusses in his book *C. R. W. Nevinson: This Cult of Violence* (Yale, 2002). As if in reply, Snow fails

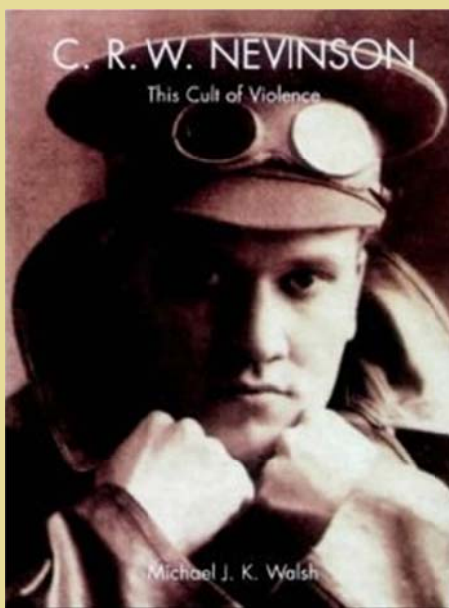
to mention *La Mitrailleuse* (1915; Tate Gallery – shown in the programme for a millisecond), which is not just considered to be Nevinson's finest 'symbiosis of man and machine,' but for some *the* finest depiction. Walter Sickert described it as 'the most authoritative and concentrated utterance on the war;' Charles Lewis Hind (London *Evening News*) found it 'the best and most ruthless illustration of the menace of this deadly machine war.'

Nevinson and Marinetti sent their 'A Futurist Manifesto' to *The Observer* in June 1914, appending the names of Lewis, Wadsworth, Epstein and other notables. This led to a rift with Lewis, who had no wish to be labelled a Futurist at a time when he wanted to champion his own modernist movement, Vorticism. Despite his public pronouncements in support of the Futurist ethic, Nevinson was often nervy and in ill-health, and had little personal enthusiasm for war – especially if it involved his own active participation. He explained in *Paint and Prejudice* (his unreliable memoirs of 1938) that 'my own doctor said the Army was out of the question for me [...] owing to my limp'. It was his father Henry, a famous war correspondent, who felt at home in the front line of battle (Henry had written to the publisher John Lane to introduce 'my son [...] and his friend Wyndham Lewis [...] revolutionary artists of Futurist fame' and their 'artistic magazine': Richard provided the name *Blast*). Henry wrote in October 1914: 'Rich[ard] much disturbed about war & the Futurist support of its horrors'.

As Jon Snow said, Nevinson then went to France as a Red Cross ambulance driver [organised by his father]. However, as Snow did not say, Nevinson's 'very poor' ambulance driving was terminated after eight days in November 1914 (man and machine were clearly not in harmony), and he was sent to tend the wounded with considerably more success, as Nevinson himself superbly illustrates in his *La Patrie*. Snow's statement that 'ill-health brought [Nevinson] back to Britain' agrees with Nevinson's brief and ambiguous statement in *Paint and Prejudice* that in January 1915 'I crocked up and was sent home'. However, the official records of the Ambulance Unit say that his return home was for 'business reasons', whilst in February 1915 he told the *Daily Express* that 'Beyond a severe attack of rheumatism, my health is better than before the war'. Jon Snow's research

here is inadequate, something all the more remarkable in that he is a prominent journalist, and has been presenter of *Channel 4 News* since 1989.

There was, then, no distinguishing ‘before’ and ‘after’ to link the two pictures of 1915 and 1916 discussed by Snow. Instead, Nevinson continued a persistent and skilful manipulation of the press in which he portrayed himself as a brave ambulance driver, whose hurtling machine epitomised the Futurist ethic. Nevinson knew it was important to maintain this image, exemplified by his outfit of cap, goggles and greatcoat in a picture taken in March 1917, over a year after he was invalided out of the RAMC; this appears on the cover of Walsh’s *C.R.W. Nevinson*.



Michael J.K. Walsh
*C.R.W. Nevinson:
This Cult of Violence*



C.R.W. Nevinson
La Mitrailleuse
Tate Gallery, 1915.

To illustrate the ‘controversial’ side of Nevinson, Snow talked about the furore that surrounded the censorship of *Paths of Glory* (1917; Imperial War Museum). Nevinson had already encountered difficulties when he proposed to exhibit *A Group of Soldiers* (1917; Imperial War Museum), which was described by the censor, Major Lee, as depicting ‘the type of man [...] not worthy of the British Army’. Nevinson was incandescent at this ‘aesthetic censorship’ and talked of British Tommies depicted as ‘high-souled eunuchs looking mild-eyed, unable to melt butter on their tongues’. He added ‘I refuse to insult the British army with such sentimental bilge’. When Nevinson was banned

formally from exhibiting a picture of anonymous dead Tommies in *Paths of Glory*, he retaliated by exhibiting his work with a broad strip of brown paper across it with a very large 'CENSORED' written in blue chalk. Whether this act was one of anger, bravado or naiveté, the resulting controversy was manufactured entirely by Nevinson – he had several months' warning of the censor's decision – and the affair provided admirable publicity for him in his role as anti-establishment rebel. Snow is correct to have said that it was 'a deliberately provocative act' and that 'the provocateur' won, but he fails to mention the fact that by the end of 1917 many critics thought that Nevinson had started to lose his way creatively. This time there really was a 'before' and 'after', in that Nevinson now seemed reluctant to tackle the subject of the brutality of war head-on. Arnold Bennett wrote to Robert Ross that 'There is not by any means the same striking creative force. My opinion is that this artist is running short of inspiration'. In a reply, 'Ross talked of "monotony," "sameness" and "repetition,"' and Frank Rutter and Ezra Pound were critical also. Finally, Snow omitted two important images of war from Nevinson's late period, *The Twentieth Century* (1932-35; Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne), and the smaller *The Unending Cult of Human Sacrifice* (1934; Imperial War Museum). The former is particularly powerful in its evocation of the threat to mankind posed by the rise of militarism and totalitarianism in the 1930s.

Snow left the rest of the First World War in the hands of Paul Nash (whom he said was influenced by the Surrealists: but surely not until the 1920s?) and Stanley Spencer. He showed Nash's ironically-titled *We are Making a New World* (1918; Imperial War Museum) to illustrate Nash's description of the war landscape: 'It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless'. Snow emphasised the suffering of his three artists, Nash 'traumatised', Nevinson 'on the edge of a nervous breakdown' and Spencer 'crushed by the experience of active service'. I know that the programme producers made enquiries to Lewis scholars about Wyndham Lewis's *A Battery Shelled* (1919; Imperial War Museum), but decided not to discuss it. This was perhaps fortunate; Snow offered this as another of his ten best British artworks about war in *The Observer* and says, surely wrongly, that the work contains remnants of cubism and futurism, instead of identifying its Vorticist nature, and the allusion in it to Japanese art. Snow has Lewis 'serving' in the artillery in 1916 (He wasn't a combatant until 1917) and says that the

painting shows 'a dead gunner being buried following an attack on an artillery battery'. Both these items of information appear to be cribbed from a website for a UNESCO-sponsored exhibition of 1998 to mark the 80th anniversary of the armistice (<http://www.art-ww1.com/gb/texte/038text.html>). Actually the picture shows an attack going on – what does he think the title means? – and nobody is being buried: for soldiers were not buried on the battlefield. In fact a man – dead or wounded is not decidable – is being carried away; nor is this marginal incident what the painting is about. Snow compared *A Battery Shelled* with Nevinson's 'two dead Tommies above a trench' (*Paths of Glory* again), but since Lewis has no dead men, the comparison fails.

I wonder, too, if the absence of Edward Wadsworth's *Dazzle Ships* (1919; National Gallery of Canada) and Mark Gertler's *Merry Go-Round* (1916; Tate Britain), two iconic images that surely merited inclusion, was because Lewis, Wadsworth and Gertler lacked the degree of war 'suffering' that fitted Snow's (no doubt subconscious) agenda? Instead, he suggested, after talking to the contemporary artist John Keane, that the role of the artist is 'to reflect, to be more contemplative [...] and no less powerful for it'. This provided a neat justification for Snow's 'favourite of all war artists, Stanley Spencer', and his paintings at the Sandham Memorial Chapel at Burghclere, executed between 1927 and 1932, many years after the cessation of hostilities. Snow describes how the work 'brings the whole concept of art and war together in one place in extraordinary detail'. I do not quibble with Snow about the quality of Spencer's work, nor that this choice features 'no mud, no weapons, no generals'. Instead, I question several factual inaccuracies, the absence of context, and Snow's veneration of his 'absolute number one favourite,' *Bedmaking* (1932; Burghclere – Snow called it 'Bed-changing'), when no room was found for far more vital works.

Snow says that the chapel was in memory of Lieutenant Henry Sandham 'who died in World War One'. In fact Sandham died in 1919, and somewhat un-romantically, of an enlarged spleen due to malaria. Nor is it 'Spencer's Sistine Chapel;' it is in fact based on Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel (c. 1305) in Padua. Snow says also that after the war Spencer 'couldn't paint straight away [...] instead he spent years plotting this great meditation on the human face of war'. In reality, Spencer recommenced work almost immediately, on both *Swan Upping at Cookham* (1915-19; Tate Britain) and, more relevantly,

Travoys with Wounded Soldiers Arriving at a Dressing Station at Smol, Macedonia (1919; Imperial War Museum), a picture intended, like Lewis's *A Battery Shelled*, for a never-completed Hall of Remembrance. How Snow could ignore this work, Spencer's major and essential depiction of war-wounded men viewed from a fascinating perspective, remains a mystery.



Stanley Spencer
*Travoys with Wounded Soldiers
Arriving at a Dressing Station at Smol,
Macedonia*
1919; Imperial War Museum.

Bedmaking, as Snow fails to contextualise, is one of *series* of images at Burghclere that relate to Spencer's experience at the Beaufort War Hospital in Bristol in 1915, perhaps conflated with the time he spent as a patient with malaria in Salonika – it is much more specific than Snow's 'some kind of a care place'. (Neither Snow nor his researcher appear to have consulted Paul Gough's excellent *Stanley Spencer: Journey to Burghclere* (2006)). Other works in this series include *Ablutions*, *Scrubbing the Floor*, *Filling Tea Urns*, and *Sorting Laundry*. Snow is enthralled by the fact that Spencer had painted 'details nobody thinking about war would ever even dream of'. But of course Spencer was painting from his own personal experience – he found redemption in the performance of menial hospital duties. In late 1915 he wrote: 'When I am ready for the Kingdom of Heaven, I shall tell God to take into consideration the number of men I have cleaned & the amount of *floors* I have *scrubbed* . . .'. It is a measure of Snow's lack of focus that (except for some small military-themed photographs on the wall) there is nothing to connect *Bedmaking* with either war or a wartime setting. It is a cosy picture of nice stripy mattresses and wallpaper, soft warm bed linen and an outsize hot

water bottle. It reminds me far more of a private sanatorium painted by a superior Beryl Cook than the outstanding representation of the First World War.



Stanley Spencer
Bedmaking
1932
Sandham Memorial Chapel,
Burghclere

Surprisingly, there was no room in Snow's programme for Paul Nash's iconic *Totes Meer* (1940-1; Tate Britain), perhaps the seminal work of the Second World War, depicting wrecked German aircraft at Cowley outside Oxford. However, a few seconds of film of Nash himself were shown. Rather than a work of art, we were given a section devoted to Kenneth Clark's role as chairman of the War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC) and his commission for 6,000 individual pieces of art that would 'capture every facet' of Britain and the threat to her way of life. This attempt to record 'a green and pleasant land' resonates with Stanley Baldwin's 'tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the country smithy', Orwell's 'old maids biking to Holy Communion' and Humphrey Jennings's 'the evening hymn of the lark'. Whether this idyllic Albion ever existed is debatable: even Jennings himself admitted that 'The English live in cities [but pretend that] they are in a hamlet on the Downs.'

Jon Snow showed no wish to look at actual representations of war, but rather at the effects of war on the general populace, 'the war zone of the home front'. There were very brief mentions of John Piper and Eric Ravilious, and an uncredited shot of the technically accurate realism of Dame Laura Knight's *Ruby Loftus screwing a Breech-ring* (1943; Imperial War Museum). This last work is a reminder that in wartime, clarity of subject and meaning, and therefore message, could take

precedence over aesthetic considerations. The main thrust of Snow's version of the Second World War was towards the work of Stanley Spencer (again), and Henry Moore. In her 1997 book on Spencer, Fiona McCarthy criticises his *Clyde Shipbuilding* series as lacking 'central visual focus' and showing an inability to 'rise to the sense of containment within the war experience' of the Sandham War Memorial. Given the programme's tight time constraints, Snow's concentration on one of Spencer's lesser works appears unjustified. Snow was highly appreciative of Henry Moore's images of cocoon-like people sleeping in underground tube stations, 'for me the most remarkable evocation of this time' and more controversially, 'to this day they are *our* defining image of Britain in World War Two'. Whilst I too believe Moore's work to be of a very high standard, I cannot agree with this imprudent last remark, which needs qualification.

The length of time devoted to Spencer and Moore meant that not only were there no images of actual warfare (Paul Nash, Eric Ravilious, Albert Richards?), but also not a single mention of any of the highly-influential Neo-Romantics or their intimates. No room for Graham Sutherland's depictions of bomb damage, Keith Vaughan's drawings of barrack-room life, John Minton's waifs amid the ruined docklands; or for John Craxton's pastorals, or any of the numerous other artists that feature in Brian Foss's comprehensive *War Paint: Art, War, State and Identity in Britain, 1939-1945* (Yale, 2007). Sue Malvern criticises the WAAC both as a 'middlebrow view of middle England' and also because it was dominated by Sutherland and Piper's 'insular and conservative aesthetic of neoromanticism'. However, there was also virtually no representation in Snow's programme of Malvern's preferred choices: Nicholson, Hepworth, *émigré* artists and women artists, all of whom were as under-represented by Snow as they were by the WAAC.

Space does not permit an examination of the work of the three featured modern artists (Keane, Deller, McQueen); though Snow says rightly that in war the 'true cost is the price paid by the individual'. Snow seems naive in his expectation that Steve McQueen's 'chillingly emotional stamps' of individual dead servicemen would ever be issued by the Royal Mail, but deduces correctly that they are 'too personal, too intimate, too tangible' for this purpose. Interestingly, the head of Queen Elizabeth II imprinted on McQueen's work is stated to be the most reproduced image of all time.

I conclude as I began, with a quote from Waugh's *Scoop*, one that – perhaps a little harshly – sums up Snow's programme: 'It is seldom that they are absolutely, point-blank wrong. That is the popular belief, but those who are in the know can usually discern an embryo of truth, a little grit of fact, like the core of a pearl, round which have been deposited the delicate layers of ornament'.