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The Family of Man Redux

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As if coming back into consciousness, out of the black-and-white blur and buzz of interference, a black-and-white image of a pair of formally dressed lovers appears. Slightly nervous, clutching a bouquet in a commemorative studio photograph at least half a century old, these are Claudia Sola's grandparents on their wedding day. Scaled up, they tower above us. In its full projection, the screen where we meet them in *Being There* is three metres high by four metres wide.

Around this stable anchor of a cherished family photograph, Sola conjures a swirling sea of images, variously old and new, known and unknown, professional and amateur. Those happened across mix, without credit, with images from her personal collection. A dozen weddings, piles of family portraits, endless loving couples and scores of set-piece holiday views spiral into a disorienting display of photography's multitude. We see tourists in front of monuments, uniformed group celebrations and the photographic record of significant achievements, often shown in grids of four, at such speed that only glimpses are offered. When viewed impersonally, en masse and in rapid succession, each image becomes a visual

trope rather than a private event. Structured to follow the turbulent rhythmic dynamics of Mogwai's characteristically emotive soundtrack, *Being There's* seven minutes of fractured narrative is unified by a plaintive, relentless piano melody but is always underscored by the distorted grind of guitar fuzz on surround sound. The immersive viewing experience and the sequences that unfold similarly destabilise any comforting familiarity.

Christmas-themed photos, for example, rush past in a sentimental, glittering glut. Baubles, nativity scenes and a Christ-like sleeping infant beneath a tree flow into road signs to Bethlehem, and the journey takes an unexpected turn. Souvenir photographs of the Middle East abut images of the Arab-Israeli conflict; the military presence, usually screened out of holiday snaps, infiltrates the photographs compiled here as it does daily life in the region. Universal symbols are repeated the world over but out of context their depicted meaning is no longer clear. Are these palms lifted in praise or surrender? Are the two fingers flicked in a V shaping a subversive salute? This pose is repeatedly performed for the camera but, removed from its usual singular location and situated meaning, we cannot know if it encodes cuteness, signals victory or celebrates peace. The graphic litany of serious wounds and injuries are easier to read but much harder to view. These images show the dark side of internet image banks and ubiquitous photography. If it can be pictured, it will be, and Sola therefore includes it in her carefully orchestrated visual noise.

As the soundtrack retunes as if through a radio dial, the frequencies of *Being There* alter and the tone changes. Some edits are deliberately harmonious; others use the politics of collage to create aggressive juxtapositions; all are affective and make compulsive viewing. Brought together, comic book superheroes and military might look unsettlingly similar. When disembodied, images of pleasure are rendered hollow – pumped muscles and exposed

breasts appear grotesque. The voice-over of a traumatised working soldier dealing with the fear of imminent death in the pattern of routine working life jars purposefully with images of convenience food and sexual flesh on display, yet Sola deftly controls the mood. From army parades to a scout badge embroidered with a spectrum of colours, links are creatively constructed, and the sequence leads into spontaneous photographs recording the chance beauty of rainbows, almost too sweet to digest. The shifting emotional register of the soundtrack always allows for shadows, however, and a subsequent roll of collections of precious objects includes a digression into Nazi memorabilia. Discord is always close at hand.

The final sequences build to a crescendo. Medical imagery of brain scans and x-rays segue into battle scars and signs of survival. The symbolic patterns of molecular blood samples – from Sola's own friends and family – are drawn into visual parallel with medical diagrams, children's drawings and tattoo design as the frequency speeds towards oblivion. The final slide shows a bulging bicep inked with 'Mum and Dad'. The music abruptly halts. We are returned to the permanently binding ties of the family. *Being There* looks closely at the fine grain of hope and despair in our collective visual output; at what unites and divides us; at the cruelties and comforts that brutalise and soothe; at the visual similarities in what we value and what repels. While the work as a whole draws repeated equivalences between disparate experiences that could be described as humanist, unlike Edward Steichen's most famous *Family of Man* show of 1955, Sola does not smooth over political difficulties aesthetically. Disruptions and contradictions are fully visible and hard to reconcile; friction effectively forms the structure of the piece.