

# Chapter Nine

## Stills from a Film That Was Never Made: Cinema, Gesture, Memory

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Among their myriad of powers, images may become propellants of memory - dynamic, even explosive materials that force the bullets of remembrance and imagination into motion, conscious or unconscious.<sup>1</sup> One particular photograph so triggered the flights of my thought as I encountered it, quite accidentally, whilst browsing through the Yad Vashem photo archive online.<sup>2</sup> The photograph affected me strongly and has obsessed me since, causing a sort of historical reverie – or nightmare – that I will unravel in what follows. Perhaps the photograph acquired in my eyes the status of what the art historian Aby Warburg called an ‘emotive formula’ (*Pathosformel*): a temporal and psychic force that with particular affective and corporeal intensity compels the recognition of something that has been buried in oblivion, the return of the repressed.<sup>3</sup>

The photograph spoke to me in at least two ways. On the one hand, I was made to wonder how the past leaves us memories we find difficult to categorize, memories that stir our imaginations of history and obliges us to acknowledge something (in our past as well as present) we normally don’t want to acknowledge. On the other, I was led to ask how we become the protagonists of our lives and the histories we belong to; how we become the beings we perceive we are. These questions emanated from the photograph that I felt was seeking to burst the stillness of its frame and that materialized a particular ‘memory in motion’: the gestures of the characters in the picture were already anticipating their next position, and the photograph itself was to become meaningful only when viewed in relation to the images that (one might imagine) preceded and followed it.

Thus the problem also became one of motion and stasis, of images that move, either in imagination or animated by a machine. There is an enigmatic but compelling statement Giorgio Agamben has put forward that every image can be considered a still ‘of a lost film’ wherein it regains its ‘true meaning’.<sup>4</sup> Every image, on this account, is ‘mobile’ in the sense that it ‘virtually anticipates its future developments and remembers its former gestures’.<sup>5</sup> This is true for the images that live within us, in our dreams, memories, imaginations, and desires; they are never at rest. I started to speculate that perhaps the position of cinema has at some point become so powerful that