Abstract

When the filmmaker returns to their insular Jewish hometown, filming offers a way to mediate their new foreignness in the spaces they grew up in.

The film is grounded in a personal politics of return to the filmmaker's insular, suburban Jewish Zionist hometown and replicates their simultaneous insider and outsider positionalities there. *Proxy*'s temporality and emotional world are defined by the filmmaker's medical transition and resentment/rejection of the strict Zionism of their childhood. The film brings audiences into close proximity with the town's children, who act as visual representatives of Zionist and traditionally Jewish ideological formation and the filmmaker's own failure/refusal to live out those ideologies. *Proxy* employs a methodology of slow observation alongside interactions with local children. Its restrained first-person voiceover is paired with observational verité footage and ambient location sound. Distant, observational, more intimate fragmentary and closeup footage situate audiences in a tense subjectivity between insider and outsider.

Proxy showcases the lush, idyllic landscapes of suburban Zionism, asking audiences to grapple with these 'perfect', privileged sites and their relationship to hyper-present symbols of imperialism and violence visible on children's clothing, in their hands, on front lawns, and in shop windows. *Proxy* is situated across time, in both the anticipatory space of summer where the filmmaker has not yet begun medical transition but imagines it from behind the camera, and simultaneously in the middle of medical transition through its voiceover, recorded nine months after initial filming. The film is oriented toward the future, desperate for change in and beyond the filmmaker's body.

Proxy:
Suburban Zionism, Trans Positionality, and the Politics of Return on Camera

"We *are* the public, film-makers *are* the public."
- Santiago Alvarez, *in interview with the editors of* Cineaste, 1975

"...the state of just having lost something is like the most enlightened state in the world."
- Annie Baker, *The Aliens*, 2011

"If not this, what?"
- Lee Edelman, *No Future*, 2006

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INTRODUCTION: "IF NOT THIS, WHAT?"

Proxy begins with a quote from Lee Edelman's 2006 monograph *No Future*:

"Always the question: if not this, what?"[1]

With this quote, I ground the film in a concern with the something-else, a hopeful potential for what exists beyond the world of the film, the insular world of my hometown and the insistent ideological structures of suburban Zionism. In looking at these images and instances of Zionist certainty, I orient towards the *uncertainty* inherent in Edelman's quote–*if not this, what?* What futures are there for Jewish life and survival beyond Zionism? Disorienting from certainty is the first step we can take as viewers, looking at Zionist life, to resist its powerful logic and affect.[2]

Proxy's observational intervention into the logics of suburban Zionism is a response to my own lived experiences within those logics. In this way the film may be understood as a "resistive" narrative,[3] staged in opposition to the discursive powers that dominated my childhood and which continue to dominate the American political landscape, enabling continued popular and financial support for Israel's violence against Palestinians.

Before moving into a consideration of how *Proxy* intervenes in these logics, it is important to address the specific forms they take. An "'ideology of affliction,'"[4] which traces back through scriptural narratives of communal loss and exile, insists on the perpetual victim-status of the Jewish people. The Holocaust is added to this lineage of affliction, urging an end to exile in the form of the nationalist realization of historically religious narratives surrounding return to the biblical land of Israel.

Israel does not overcome this founding logic of affliction. Rather, Zionism's logic continues to insist Israel is perpetually at risk and victimized by Palestinian resistance and by neighboring nations. Further, blurred lines between the Israeli state and Jewish life writ large reinforce a sense of Jewish

[1] Edelman 2004, 4.
[2] Drawing on Penslar's 2023 exploration of Zionism as propelled by emotion and his working assertion that "emotion is a cultural construction" (7).
[3] G. Abraham, personal communication with author, spring 2025
[4] Susser and Liebman 1999, 134; see also Magid 2023, 157-158.

victimization where any threat to Israel is framed as an existential threat to Jewish futurity. Holocaust memory becomes especially important here; the precedent of victimization set by the Holocaust informs a "timeline of continuity" with the Israeli present. The construction of the Zionist project as a response to an existential threat to Jewish life, "an act of collective self-emancipation in the wake of catastrophe," gives way to a revised ideology of affliction where the Holocaust past signals Holocausts future. This in turn allows for the normalization of a logic of self-defense, where the "perceived existential threat" of Palestinian life must be subjugated to secure the Jewish future.[5] The Holocaust came to work as a "timeless template for Israel's existential vulnerability," with "the Nazi extermination of Jews not only explain[ing] Israel's historical origins but also signif[ying] an impending threat to its future survival." Jews were "eternal victims," and "it was impossible to trust anyone else to protect them…A potential Holocaust hid beneath the surface of the present." This is the discourse which informed my childhood. As I understood it–as I was taught–*if Israel did not defend itself, another Holocaust would certainly take place.*[6]

In the wake of Hamas's attacks targeting Israeli *kibbutzim* on October 7, 2024, this logic was vindicated for many American Jews. For them, militant Palestinian resistance at October 7th's scale was exactly the sort of "future Holocaust"[7] they had predicted and tried to prevent through strong military control.[8] This "repeated analogy between terrorism and the Holocaust" has precedent in American Jewish Zionist discourse surrounding Palestinian resistance, invoking the Holocaust to "muste[r] great emotional power" in favor of "innocent Jewish victims." As Amy Kaplan critically notes, such violence by Palestinians "lacks the powerful state organization behind the systematic industrialized violence" of the Nazi Holocaust.[9] It also fails to account for the dynamics of power and suffering which inform and

[5] Romm 2025.
[6] Kaplan 2018, 178-185.
[7] Ibid.
[8] See Azoulai quoted in Romm 2025: "Let no one reside in the Gaza Strip for all the world to see, because October 7 was in a way a second Holocaust."
[9] Kaplan 2018, 195.

cultivate militant Palestinian resistance, which does not happen in a vacuum but rather in response to complex conditions of disempowerment and subjugation under Israeli occupation.[10]

The subjects of *Proxy*, who are largely Modern Orthodox, also represent a particular sector of American Jewry for whom the "feelings of isolation and vulnerability" which cultivate the "continuing resilience of the 'ideology of affliction'"[11] and therefore a belief in the "future Holocaust" are especially strong. For these American Jews, Israel is not a distant geopolitical concern but a close religious and relational issue; many have family and friends living there. Many of *Proxy*'s subjects have spent time living in Israel or visit as frequently as they can. Some are ex-Israeli military. The ties between insular suburban Jewish communities and Israeli society are quite close. It is important to understand the intensity of the relationship between *Proxy*'s subjects and Israel–not just a political relationship but an inherited, embodied, and affective relationship. This is the discursive space we observe and intervene in through *Proxy*. The question Edelman helps us pose–*if not this, what?*–is difficult, because 'this' is so deeply ingrained, and so carefully cultivated, that a radical discursive shift is hard to imagine. It is my hope, however, that *Proxy* will offer a way into the work of manifesting such a shift.

Proxy gathers critical theoretical frameworks from across queer theory, film, media and performance studies, and the study of religion, and draws formal inspiration from poetic, nonfiction and dramatic works across written, sonic and audiovisual mediums. What follows traces the frameworks and influences at the core of the film, clarifying the theoretical and creative impulses threaded throughout, and constructing a firmer politics for a piece which, by nature of its experimental form, threatens ambiguity. By attending to these impulses and politics, this essay will clarify how *Proxy* may help us answer Edelman's difficult question.

THE IMPULSE TO RECORD

[10] See Magid 2021, 161-162, Asad 2007, 46, and Romm 2025.
[11] Susser and Liebman 1999, 54.

At the core of *Proxy* is the personal impulse to record. In accordance with Jonas Mekas' theory of the diary film, *Proxy* is at one level a manifestation of the subjective gaze, the individual's attempt to translate or reproduce their affective reality.[12] For *Proxy*, the reproduction of the subjective is a core impulse, but *Proxy* also manifests a *political imperative* to record, for which a language of archival activism may be useful. As I filmed and later reviewed tense and guarded sites like Teaneck's 2024 Israel Independence Day rally, my subjective-affective first-person gaze merged and negotiated with my increasing sense that the images I was documenting were *uniquely critical historical instances*. My video records would attest to the historical existence and intensity of suburban Zionist fervor. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay discusses this phenomenon in her critical volume *Potential History*, where she describes the radical archival action taken by Israeli soldier Anat Kam during her compulsory service in the mid 2000s. Azoulay asks us to imagine Kam's inner dialogue upon encountering military documents "containing explicit discussions and instructions surrounding the assassination of Palestinians." She writes, "imagine [Kam]...telling herself something like, 'If I don't rescue these documents now they will be trashed…they will escape the public eye and will not entail any intervention to stop what…appears to me unacceptable, even though it was nothing but the reiteration of common procedures.'"[13]

The work of documenting and saving images of Zionism which are "unacceptable" to their viewer–in both Kam's case and in my own case with *Proxy*–is the work of *mobilizing the subjective gaze* to manifest or create an archive of present images or texts. With *Proxy*, I create a visual archive of suburban Zionism whose emergence from my subjective gaze is the basis for its strong orientation in a personal-as-political framework. My personal stake in and tensions with the space are what motivate my images; the archive they form is an archive of my politics of dissent, a document of that which "appears to me unacceptable." The limits of this archival framework are the same as the limits of the film; those sites that are not nostalgically familiar to me or which I deem somehow acceptable escape documentation and archival status.

[12] Mekas 2016, 739.
[13] Azoulay 2019, 232-233.

AESTHETIC THEORY & APPROACHES

Proxy was filmed primarily in May and August 2024. I filmed alone, using a single-camera/single-mic operation. Because I was alone, I was able to navigate Teaneck's landscape fluidly and to change locations with relative ease. I followed an observational production strategy put forth by experimental documentarian Kimi Takesue, whose solo single-camera production for her 2023 film *Onlookers* allowed her to move around the landscapes of Laos with ease, to be minimally invasive at filming sites, and to engage closely with participants, especially children. I take inspiration from Takesue's still frames; in *Onlookers* and other projects, she sets up her static camera and documents subjects as they wander in and out of frame. Sometimes, Takesue's subjects engage with the camera's/her gaze, while sometimes they ignore it. Takesue noted part of her filmmaking strategy was to make herself noticeable and approachable to subjects because she did not pursue releases, as her subjects tend only to be on-screen for brief encounters and her films are not usually character-driven. She also noted the language and cultural barriers she was navigating made releases harder to procure.[14]

Similarly, *Proxy*'s subjects wander in and out of frame, making fleeting contact with the camera. Some participants, especially children, spend more time in frame, interacting with me verbally or through facial cues. I made the choice not to procure releases for these encounters because they were filmed in public spaces where there is no reasonable expectation of privacy,[15] and because, following Takesue's strategy, I made the camera and myself conspicuous to parents and children and made myself available for curious or concerned parties to approach me with questions or to let me know they would prefer not to be on camera. Here I hoped to act against the observational cinema tradition of "filming 'as if the camera were not there,'" attending instead to the more interesting "situation that actually exists…[which is that]

[14] K. Takesue, personal communication with author, summer 2023.
[15] Photographers' Guide to Privacy 2007, 2-3, 11-12.

The camera *is* there."[16] At the same time, I felt procuring releases would hinder the filming process more than it would help, creating more anxiety around the camera and my gaze than was already present. As I will explore in more depth shortly, the local Jewish community was (and remains) on high alert for instances of antisemitism and intrusion from outsiders more broadly; I felt trying to procure releases for long observational shots would frame me and my project as intrusive and foreign to Teaneck, interrupting whatever insider status I hoped to retain.

The locations I filmed were determined by a sense of what could be considered 'private' vs 'public' as well as an understanding of the intense fear and defensiveness around particular Jewish institutions at the time of filming. There are many Jewish day schools and synagogues around Teaneck, but these sites were more sensitive and highly guarded against perceived outsiders. On one occasion, I filmed the exterior of a local synagogue and was approached by an angry and concerned member, who asked why I was "casing the joint" and took my picture to share with the community security team and local police. Because the community was on high alert for instances of antisemitic violence and intrusion, it did not feel productive to pursue other such guarded images.

This defensive tendency extended into encounters with local businesses; while I was filming in the parking lot of a local Kosher grocery store, its owners drove up to me and asked that I delete my footage, because they worried their business could be targeted in connection with my work. On another occasion, while I was filming the exterior of a busy pizza place down the street from where I grew up, customers inside called the police. When an officer arrived, he told me I was "totally legal" to be filming as I was and asked whether "they" (the Jewish customers) were "bothering me." This interaction highlights the defensive posture of the local community and the dangers of strict insider/outsider assumptions as well as reliance on policing; community members who thought I was a dangerous infiltrator called the police (an outsider), who in turn thought I was an outsider, and aligned himself with me against the Jewish community's paranoia. In response to such moments of intense defensiveness, I

[16] MacDougall 2016, 569, emphasis preserved.

avoided similarly tense or guarded areas and tried to make myself approachable and unthreatening where possible in public locations, especially where I was filming children.

My choice of locations was also guided by my nostalgic familiarity with the town. I brought my camera to the playgrounds I frequented as a child and returned to familiar restaurants, shops and residential neighborhoods. Driven by memories of what it felt like to occupy these spaces as an insider, I directed my gaze/my frame at sticky, resonant details (colors, textures, structures) and people who reminded me of myself and the people who surrounded me in childhood. I traced my own and my friends' and family's familiar spaces around town, in this way documenting Teaneck in a subjective diaristic mode determined by my gaze. As Jonas Mekas writes of his own process, I was engaged in a project of "merg[ing] Reality and Self," creating footage which "tells a lot about me–actually, more about me than about the [place]" because in my footage "you don't see the [place], you see only [those] singled-out details" which I was drawn to represent.[17]

Glitch

Proxy mobilizes a theory and aesthetic of glitch in its editorial practice at specific moments where still, continuous frames are disrupted by disjunctive cuts corresponding with disruptions in the voiceover. Moments of repetition, clarification and throat-clearing in the voiceover are paired with disjunctive visual cuts which repeat and/or jump, breaking continuity in the direct/verité time being represented on screen. These non-continuous, disjunctive editorial choices take critical cues from Whit Pow's "A Trans Historiography of Glitches and Errors," which posits the glitch as a critical site for mediating and imagining trans histories and futures. *Proxy* is at one level a project of mediating my trans history, present and future, springing from the disjunctures and impossibilities of trans existence in the insular Jewish suburb. For Pow, the glitch is "revelatory in relationship to power structures" because it simultaneously creates and represents "the point of complete illegibility." The glitch "highlights the ways in which we

[17] Mekas 2016, 739.

might imagine alternative possibilities, and alternative futures" beyond and against the structures of knowledge and power which orient and define the limits of what we can know, do and become.[18]

Pow constructs the glitch as "a place of…in-between-ness," representing that which is "unstable, something unimaginable whose status is never quite fixed, never quite bounded."[19] The glitch works as an effective audiovisual metaphor for trans existence and experience because of this framework; transness is that thing which defies/transcends power and knowledge structures and insists on radical mediation.

Further, Pow writes, "if we conceptualize the error as *inside*, we might be able to position the glitch, a kind of…failure, as operating *outside*…In the glitch, failure is positioned not as a *state* but as an *act* that dissolves these boundaries."[20] Here, Pow asserts the glitch as a *response* to the limits of power structures. This reframes failure–the core 'problem' of the glitch (where media 'fails' to be continuous, coherent, knowable) as radically generative, acting out new ways of being and knowing outside the limits of power. For trans existence and temporal experience, the disjuncture of glitch reflects both the impossibility of mediating transness within accepted structures of power (continuity editing as one of these structures) and the possibility of mediating trans history and making trans futures through glitched, nontraditional forms.

Building on this theoretical capacity of the glitch to create and/or gesture toward logics which oppose or transcend dominant power structures, *Proxy* mobilizes the glitch not only as a way of mediating my trans subjectivity but as a way of breaking from the insular, strict logics of Teaneck's Zionism. *Proxy*'s disjunctive or glitch moments attempt to briefly remove the audience from immersion in the seduction and certainties of the suburban landscape, rupturing identification with suburban Zionism and reminding audiences of a world beyond Teaneck. The glitch disrupts Teaneck's temporal and spatial enclosures, opening up and mediating the possibility of knowledges and spaces oppositional to Zionism.

[18] Pow 2021, 204-205.
[19] Ibid., 209.
[20] Pow 2021, 209, emphasis preserved.

Failure

Proxy also engages with the generative capacities of failure as framed by Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*. Halberstam frames failure as an "oppositional tool" which can be taken up as "a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique."[21] In the context of *Proxy*, failure is the state and angle from which I point the camera back at images of Zionism and its "dominant logics of power and discipline." Having failed to assume the embodied ideologies I was born to inherit–by failing to assimilate with traditional gender norms, heterosexual best practices, and political alignment with the State of Israel–I land in a space outside what Halberstam calls "heteronormative common sense," situated in "radical opposition" to my community of origin.[22] Halberstam asks how failure can be mobilized productively, for political and personal liberation. He suggests that we "practic[e] failure,"[23] and in particular mobilize "forgetfulness" in order to "interrup[t]...generational modes of transmission that ensure the continuity of…normativity."[24]

Forgetting–the cultivation of "absence"–"leads to…new form[s] of knowing."[25] This framework is particularly useful in the context of *Proxy*, where memory and nostalgia guide my return to sites of ideological production but the oppositional tools of failure and forgetfulness insist on critical engagement with those sites. Throughout the film, I grapple with the tensions between remembering and forgetting the difficult ideological logics of my childhood. Through visual observational distance, I cultivate absence between myself and these strong intergenerational logics. At the same time, through observational but increasingly close encounters with children and ideological production sites, I mediate the nostalgia and pain of forgetting, of cultivating absence and breaking with normativity.

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[21] Halberstam 2011, 88.
[22] Ibid., 89-90. For further reflection on the character of Jewish failure to align with Zionism, see Romm 2025's discussion of Jews who exist outside/against Zionism: "inchoate Jews" at "perpetual risk of destruction in the Zionist-Nationalist sense…conversion to antizionism…which, for the Zionist, means death." Also see Angel 2021's discussion of American Jewish excommunication from communities of origin, Angel et al 2021's discussions of American Jews' contemporary roles in relation to Israel, and Sharansky and Troy 2021's opinion piece on their idea of the "un-Jew."
[23] Halberstam 2011, 120.
[24] Ibid., 123.
[25] Ibid., 54.

“See Me”: Poetic Voice(s)

In an interview discussing his novel *Ponyboy*, Eliot Duncan says of its titular character, “He’s like, See me. He so desperately wants to be seen.”[26] Duncan’s young trans protagonist is desperate to be perceived and received in his masculinity. In *Proxy*, I draw from Ponyboy’s tense relationship with his environment, the ways in which he yearns for visibility. “See me,” Duncan asserts. I speak from an analogous space of invisibility, where the version of myself (manifested through gender expression/identity and political ideology) I seek to create is not viable or visible in my hometown landscape. Where it is visible, it is only visible as otherness and is registered as threatening and problematic, a contaminant to the insular suburban safe zone. Through my voice, I attempt to reinsert myself (my politics, my subjectivity and my body) into the suburban safe zone, disrupting its flow by rendering myself legible within it.

I mobilize several ‘voices’ in this project of reinserting myself into the suburban landscape. Through careful uses of first person (“I”), second person (“you”) and third person (“B” and “M”), I extend an inner dialogue which renders me more visible and in turn renders my politics and my body more visible.

I make my body and its transitory, gendered position most present in the voiceover through the cross-temporal use of my ‘old’ (pretransition) voice, included in field recordings where I engage with local children alongside or layered over ‘new’ recordings of my voice, which has changed in the months since filming and beginning medical transition. Moments where my ‘old’ and ‘new’ voice(s) overlap/interrupt each other are moments of glitch as outlined above, where my embodied subjectivity disrupts normal linear time, not quite “fixed” or “bounded,” gesturing at “alternative futures” which are still being made and are not yet legible.[27]

But my embodied self plays a relatively limited role in the voiceover’s broader project, which seeks to concretize a kind of affective politics for *Proxy*. Politics and feelings are woven together such

[26] Duncan 2024, p15 in transcript.
[27] Pow 2021, 204-205.

that one cannot be distinguished from the other; my emotions are political, and my politics are emotional. In narrating this affective politics, I rely in turns on the first, second and third person. The first person "I" is the most present in *Proxy,* drawing on a diaristic (in)formal style like that modelled by Lou Sullivan in his collected diaries. Sullivan's diaries are primarily concerned with the future-oriented self, the trans body imagining and manifesting embodied changes. This imaginative, futurist orientation, grounded in uncertainty and possibility, also reflects the crucial entanglement of the personal and emotional with the political. I emulate this orientation in *Proxy*, imagining better futures for and through my own subjective position.

I struggled with the limits of the first person throughout the process of making *Proxy*, attempting to reckon with Thomas Waugh's note that "even where it is rigorously self-reflexive…the personal is perhaps shown to be political, but the political often fails to rise above the personal level."[28] To this point, I often felt the assertion of my "I" compromised the film's politics. Further, Jake Romm's assertion that "our understanding of atrocity in media is…routed through the lens of individual protagonists and of their psychology" also suggests that first person work limits the radical political capacities of that work.[29] But Waugh's conciliation that first person is best deployed in "feminist genre [work] that connects individual socialization to broader political forces" reminds me of the capacities afforded by the subjective (as demonstrated, for example, in Riggs' *Tongues Untied* or Galibert-Laîné's *Watching The Pain of Others*, which we might categorize as "feminist" or adjacent works). *Proxy* is indeed about my "individual socialization" and its relation to "broader political forces," so the "I", though difficult to work with, is perhaps the best tool available for communicating the emotional dimensions of the political and the politics of the emotional.[30]

The second person "you" appears several times; here I draw on letter-writing as a guiding formal practice. In her song "Sadness as a Gift," singer-songwriter Adrianne Lenker constructs a future against a lost past, writing and reaching for a lost love(r). "You could write me someday, and I bet you will,"

[28] Waugh 2016, 827.
[29] Romm 2024.
[30] Waugh 2016, 827.

Lenker writes, her "you" mourning that which has been lost and gesturing toward the possibility of recouping that loss.[31] Similarly, in *Proxy*, I use "you" to mourn and work through the loss of my insider positionality, but also to reimagine the future, both at a personal and political-ideological level. I use "you" as a way of writing into or even *to* Zionism,[32] addressing ideology and its reproducers directly ("You're still trying to mow the lawn in the desert"). My use of "you" also draws from Bob Dylan's "Song to Woody," where he writes to Woody Guthrie as a way both of admiring him and making him accessible, creating a dialogue where there wasn't one before.[33] With *Proxy*, I write (in)to Zionism and into my hometown, seeking visibility and dialogue against the silence/invisibility of my gendered and ideological alienation. There are several moments in *Proxy* where I express desire for the sites, feelings and logics of my hometown, even as I refuse them. Dylan's admiration for Guthrie is not burdened by refusal in this way, but is still useful as a model for how desire across distance cultivates urgent dialogue.

I use the third person sparingly in *Proxy*, referring to bits of remembered wisdom from friends who I refer to by their initials. These brief moments serve a very different purpose than "I" or "you"–the third person in *Proxy* refers outward, beyond the visual confines of the film. B and M suggest some other world beyond the insular landscapes on screen. I pair B's wisdom with a low angle of a bright blue sky, a brief visual reference to a world beyond the Zionist suburb. Further, by explicitly bringing in these third-person relational lines, I render myself in relation to an alternative community which does recognize me and from which I am not isolated; I imply that the intense insider/outsider dynamic captured in *Proxy* does not represent the limits of my experience, gesturing toward a future beyond the difficult restraints of the Zionist suburb.

The use of third person also implicates the audience. B and M, unseen and unknowable figures, are also figures who may offer room for identification for audiences; they, too, are spectators whose observations invade the safety of the suburban landscape.

[31] Lenker 2024. "Sadness as a Gift."
[32] R. D. Hamilton, personal communication with author, spring 2025.
[33] Dylan 1962. "Song to Woody."

Theorizing Suburbia

Mowing the lawn

The idea of the suburb at the heart of *Proxy* is in conversation with Nasser Abourahme's consideration of the American suburb as a phenomenon deeply tied to "Israel's self-image," which mobilizes suburban America's "idyllic rot" as a foundational civilizing ideal. Abourahme discusses the implications of the phrase "mowing the lawn" to describe "regular bombing campaigns and massacres" in Gaza.[34] Here, the essential image of the American suburb–its tidily kept lawn–is deployed as a visual metaphor for Israel's violent work against Palestinian life. This visual metaphor aligns the American suburb with Israel's violence, blurring the logics of Zionist violence with the logics governing American socioeconomic life. Because the American suburb is a familiar site, and mowing the lawn a familiar practice, the visual metaphor asks us to familiarize and assimilate with Zionist violence. Further, because suburban logic deems mowing the lawn necessary to maintain socioeconomic stasis, "mowing the lawn" as metaphor asks that we understand Zionist violence in Gaza as similarly necessary to maintain the status quo.

Fundamental to *Proxy* is this discursive connection between American suburbia and Zionist ideology. *Proxy*'s unique subject, Teaneck, allows us to glimpse a more total collapse between these discursive spaces. In Teaneck, the American suburb commits itself explicitly to Zionist stasis; the tidy lawn bears a "WE STAND WITH ISRAEL" sign.

The violent metaphor of "mowing the lawn" also offers insight into suburban Zionism's temporality. Abourahme writes that, as a metaphor, mowing the lawn represents the leisure of "repetition" and "routin[e]" in Zionist violence. Its premise is one of "biding time" against Palestinian life and resistance, repeating motions of repression to maintain an ordered Israeli world into which Palestinian life cannot interfere. Abourahme argues this routinized method of violent maintenance forgets that "forms of resistance don't stay still, they expand and grow in depth, penetration and sophistication with every

[34] Abourahme 2024, 15-16.

year."[35] In *Proxy*'s Zionist suburb, we visualize the metaphor of such leisurely maintenance of Zionist repression and ideology. Abourahme asks that we imagine "forms of resistance" which work outside of the temporal logics of suburbia–forms which experiment with rational, orderly time. One way *Proxy* attempts to escape these logics is through 'glitch' noncontinuity cuts. Duration also plays a key role in both reproducing and destabilizing suburban temporality.

Duration

Proxy engages carefully with the formal concept of duration throughout, offering several slow scenes in the heart of Zionist suburbia. The longest of these scenes positions the camera at eye-level with a small group of children playing in an otherwise quiet park. The children enter and exit the frame in play, engaging variously with the camera as they pass. We stay in this moment, which is quite slow, for almost two minutes.

Here, I attempt to highlight the leisure central to the suburban landscape (as explored above with Abourahme). The idyll of suburbia is perhaps best encapsulated in this particular manifestation of American freedom–freedom of and from *time*. No one is in a rush. Suburban children wander through the constructed, pristine landscape, able to fully immerse themselves in play. At a basic level, I seek to reproduce this leisurely quality of American suburbia in *Proxy*, asking audiences to become immersed in the slow, relaxed duration of suburban time.

My focus on duration is also a response to Palestinian political prisoner Walid Daqqa's theory of "parallel time," which attends to the ways time operates differently for the subjugated. For Daqqa, time in prison in particular loses its normal linear quality. Markers like hour, day, and month become less meaningful as mediators of duration, and instead *moments of contact with systemic violence* come to mark time as it passes. Further, he writes that parallel time represents the problem of the "future," which the

[35] Ibid., 16.

prisoner "is no longer capable of interacting with." He extends this metaphor to include Palestinians more broadly, for whom "the future is buried alive."[36]

Daqqa's parallel time makes attending to the leisure of suburban Zionism more urgent, as the idyllic flow of time enjoyed by Zionist suburbia's children contrasts sharply with the disorientation from time experienced by Palestinians. Leisure is made possible by security; the leisurely time of suburban Zionism reflects the secure, open futures of its subjects,[37] its comfortable distance from mechanisms of violence which construct temporal "fixity," "bur[ying]" the future, locking subjects in time.[38]

Paradise garden

The aesthetic world of *Proxy* takes inspiration from the aesthetics of *The Zone of Interest* (2024), which captures the idyllic domestic landscapes enjoyed by Auschwitz commandant Höss's family, living on the other side of a shared wall with the camp. For *The Zone of Interest*, a key tension lies in the "entwinement of heaven and hell," the close relationship between scenes of overwhelming beauty and signifiers of atrocity.[39] Crucially, *The Zone of Interest* never shows the violence playing out at Auschwitz, instead only signalling its existence through sounds and symbols which make their way into the family's domestic space. "Human ash" fertilizes their garden; "a fragment of human bone" is found in the river where the children are playing. In *Proxy*, symbols of atrocity–albeit less direct in their violence and connection to human devastation–similarly mingle with the beautiful landscape.

The Zone of Interest's domestic space, in particular its "paradise garden," is the mother, Hedwig's, project, the manifestation and proof of her success at living out the Nazi dream. Of her garden, she says, "this was a field three years ago," and when confronted with the possibility of having to move away, she argues, "this is our home. We're living how we dreamed we would….Everything the Fürher said about how to live is how we do. Go East. Living Space. This is our living space. This is our living

[36] Daqqa 2025, 8-13.
[37] See Susser and Liebman 1999, 135: "Jewish physical survival in the United States seems assured." Also see Magid 2023, "Are the Jews an Oppressed People Today?" In *The Necessity of Exile*.
[38] Daqqa 2025, 8-13.
[39] Barkman 2024, "Blurred lines between Heaven and Hell" section.

space."[40] The constructed "living space" of the Nazis' paradise garden, peppered with hints of the violences it endorses and creates, runs in interesting parallel to the constructed insular domestic landscape of Zionist suburbia, which is similarly peppered with signs of affiliation with the Israeli state and its violences.

Pushing the relationship between *The Zone of Interest* and *Proxy* slightly further is the centrality of the figure of the child and objects of play in both projects. For example, Romm asks us to "consider…the youngest Höss boy playing with toy soldiers" which in turn prompts our "consideration of who those soldiers are, what they have done, and how they were assembled." Romm also draws our attention to the children "play[ing] with gold teeth ripped from the camp's victims."[41] In a comparable scene in *Proxy*, a young boy plays with a small Israeli flag. He seems to relate to the flag more as a toy than an ideological symbol. With *Proxy*, I try to echo *The Zone of Interest*'s representations of the relationship between children and symbols of ideology and atrocity. It is especially intense to watch a child play with symbols of violence because of the child's encoded innocence, their powerlessness to choose which symbols they play with and are immersed in and, eventually, which violences they may become complicit in.

THE SIGN OF THE CHILD

Proxy is at its most basic a work of representation,[42] brimming with politically and culturally charged signifiers. The landscapes of suburban American Zionism I present in *Proxy* are new and subversive images, fraught first because they were previously guarded from view and second because they show the intense frequency at which Zionism is produced and reproduced in the contemporary

[40] Quoted in Romm 2024.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Hall 1997, 28-29, 36-39.

American Jewish landscape. These images begin to confront and explain Zionism's social power, attempting to give concrete shape, color, sound, and affect to Zionism.

The most charged signifiers I present in *Proxy* are children. The film emerges in direct conversation with Lee Edelman's "reproductive futurism" framework, which asserts that the child symbolizes the preservation of the American neoliberal status quo. He writes, "the child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics," being the embodied "image of the future it intends."[43] Edelman argues that the child becomes a sign, a visual metaphor which jives well with Hall's signification framework and with the medium of film. For Edelman, the image of the Child is the vehicle through which the American neoliberal public is able to visualize a consistent neoliberal tomorrow. The Child's role in the "Symbolic relations"[44] of public discourse is to maintain popular assent for dominant logics of violence and oppression, "hold[ing] us all in check."[45] Rebekah Sheldon builds on Edelman's framework, emphasizing the role of stability under reproductive futurism. Today's child represents tomorrow's discursive, economic and social structures. Sheldon writes that it is through "the child that the present may be safely reproduced as the future." Through both the signifying and actual child, we "guide" the future "such that it might reproduce the fragile safety housed by the present."[46]

With *Proxy*, I mobilize Edelman and Sheldon's frameworks in a specific American Jewish context, where the futurist obligation of the Jewish individual is to carry the present state of Jewish subjectivity into the future intact. A high-frequency anxiety surrounding the longevity of Jewish life and tradition underlies the representation of American Jewish children. Representing American Jewish children means representing the future of American Judaism, and the future of American Judaism ought to look very similar to the present state–the "fragile safety"–of today's American Judaism. Judaism's concern with the future is not with progress and change but with survival and stasis. In this context, the sign of the Child is a critical site of American Jewish identification, where representing the child also

[43] Edelman 2004, 2-3.
[44] Ibid., 29, stylization preserved.
[45] Ibid., 21.
[46] Sheldon 2016, 29.

means representing American Jewish world-building and ideological concerns. The ideological concerns American Judaism foregrounds for its children are those concerns it deems most central to the survival and maintenance of the American Jewish status quo. The child must internalize and connect with those ideologies American Judaism identifies as most important to the reproduction of the safe, stable, static present of American Jewish life.

Zionism operates as one of these fundamental ideologies ensuring the 'safety' and longevity of American Jewish stability. *Proxy* attends to the symbolic and narrative ways children internalize and reproduce Zionism. The film is particularly interested in children as subjects because of Edelman's symbolic framework.

In his book *The Necessity of Exile*, Shaul Magid writes that Jews cannot be understood as an oppressed minority in America, even while acts of antisemitism occur or hatred for Jews still exist. Magid asserts that "oppression is not simply a state of hatred–it is an exercise in power," and those individuals oriented from such hatred "certainly don't have the power to…formally limit Jewish life through politics or legislation."[47] This safety is, in part, what *Proxy*'s children represent when we look through the prism of Edelman and Sheldon's frameworks. What makes this signifier for Jewish safety so powerful is American Jewish perennial fear of the "future Holocaust." The actual material safety of mainstream American Jewry described by Magid is overshadowed by the "lens through which Jews see themselves as a collective," or "the ultimate positionality of the Jews according to Jewish history": oppression.[48]

In *Proxy*, the child meets another equally loaded signifier: the flag, which I discuss briefly in my earlier consideration of *The Zone of Interest* and suburbia. This meeting is concretized through repeated visual metaphor: the child holding, wearing, or playing with the Israeli flag. The flag signifies the safety of the Jewish people assured through or because of the state of Israel. The state becomes a highly charged and thinly veiled metaphor for Jewish safety; the preservation and defense of the state is a project of preserving and defending the Jewish people. Further, the image of the child (coded as innocent, in

[47] Magid 2023, 163-164.
[48] Ibid., 157-158.

formation) with the flag (which at a stripped level indicates nationalist ideological commitment) asks us to notice the development of ideological attachment between the child and the flag. We may notice the reframing of the flag as *toy*, loaded with social significance the child absorbs neutrally. What is striking about the relationship between child and flag is how apolitical it is, how simple the terms of their relationship are. To the child, the flag is only an object their parents hand to them, saying, *these are the colors good people celebrate*. All the child knows is the flag is something good, and holding it is a good thing to do.

CONCLUSIONS: ASPIRING TOWARD UNREACHABLE OBJECTS

Queer Phenomenology

The emotional and creative labor behind *Proxy* was/is made possible by a phenomenological approach, drawing in particular from Sara Ahmed's "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," which asserts the weight of *orientations* in research. Ahmed offers a framework of inheritance and deviance, where those objects/ideas which "background" us–which orient us from childhood–are what we are "asked to aspire 'toward.'"[49] In *Proxy*, the spaces I return to are those things I was asked to aspire toward but failed and refused to aspire or orient myself toward. Ahmed proposes that queerness–queer desire in particular–allows us to 'bend' around orientations in an unlikely way, such that "sexual disorientation slides quickly into social disorientation,"[50] so that we are able to reach "object[s]" unreachable within "conventional [lines of] genealogy."[51] In other words, queerness, a disruption of mainstream sexual and gendered embodiment, allows for a radical disruption across other ideological and

[49] Ahmed 2006, 560.
[50] Ibid., 565.
[51] Ibid., 556.

embodied lines. In *Proxy*, this "social disorientation" foregrounds and allows me to deviate from Zionism's deep affective pull.

The example I discussed in the previous section, of the child with the flag, represents an object I was "asked to aspire 'toward.'" *Proxy* is a project of aspiring toward unreachable objects–new objects, those hidden from view by my orientation. By documenting an excess of those objects which *were* within my reach, I hope to gesture toward those other, impossible objects obscured by dominant logics–toward Edelman's "what."

Exile

Shaul Magid gives us a model for how we might aspire toward the unreachable by reorienting toward exile as a "counter-Zionist" Jewish futurist position. For Magid, exile "affirms Jewish life in the present" and gestures towards "redempti[ve]," even messianic futures rather than curating a present and future of Jewish life built on nationalist rhetoric and violence. Magid's argument is grounded in an understanding of Zionist rhetoric as the *rejection* of exilic/diasporic Jewish life in favor of a singular national(ist) identity. Perhaps one answer to Edelman's *if not this, what?* is Magid's "necessity of exile," an alternative way of conceptualizing and actualizing Jewish survival and continuity outside Zionism.[52]

Witness

David MacDougall writes that the audience of an observational film is restricted by "our inability to reach through the screen and affect *their* [the subjects'] lives." With *Proxy*, I hope to intervene in this construction of the standard operations of observational documentary, instead asserting that looking at politicized images of the present offers a path toward affecting the ideological lives of their subjects. *Proxy*'s invitation to look at images in order to imagine what might replace them collapses MacDougall's "absolute separation" between audience and subject.[53] Following Michael Chanan's considerations of

[52] Magid 2023, 299-300.
[53] MacDougall 2016, 567, emphasis preserved.

Latin American testimonial cinema, "the camera is not to be a passive witness" but must try to "'penetrate reality'" toward sociopolitical change.[54]

It is my hope that *Proxy* is a project of such radical witness. Palestinian American writer Sarah Aziza reports her cousin's words, "'I continue to insist, we have not gotten used to bombing and we are afraid of everything happening to us. We have not gotten used to the sight of suffering.'"[55] *Proxy* must operate alongside and without separation from the archive of Palestinian trauma, which insists that the Zionist project is not innocent. To bear witness to Zionist suburbia is also to bear witness to its hand in violence against Palestinian life. *Proxy* is a way not only of witnessing my childhood and the ideological production of Zionism but of bearing witness to Palestinian fear and pain. Hannah Arendt writes, "now [the Jewish people] believes only in itself."[56] *Proxy* is a hopeful effort at believing in something other than ourselves, which must emerge from bearing witness to the extreme harm we have caused.

In this vein, Arielle Angel reflects that "Jewishness will be what Jewish people *as a collective* do in the world…The paradigm of peoplehood materializes around me."[57] I hope that *Proxy* will materialize the "paradigm of peoplehood" around its audiences, productively conflating Jewishness with Zionism, not allowing us to ignore that which is obvious.[58]

Finally, if we owe anything as viewers, it is our attention. This feels perhaps most true when dealing in truth, as we claim to do in documentary. I believe our attention–our witness–is the most meaningful, if also the most draining and difficult, tool we have for repair and reorientation. *Proxy* asks for attention and witness at every turn, pushing audiences to look beyond comfort and clarity at scenes of a specific world whose violence is not comfortable and does not make sense.

[54] Chanan 2016, 601-602.
[55] Aziza 2024.
[56] Quoted in Angel 2021.
[57] Angel 2021, emphasis preserved.
[58] See Angel 2025, "Debating Zionist Realism" (Arielle Angel in discussion with Mari Cohen and Jon Danforth-Appel) for further discussion of uses of and concerns around conflating Jewishness with Zionism.

The work of making better worlds is foregrounded by the work of looking at the worlds we have now. Aziza writes, "to be a witness is to make contact."[59] Through our attention (in *Proxy* and beyond), we make contact with the possibility of something better.

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[59] Aziza 2024.

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