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# Politicians in a nutshell: four-minute documentary portraits of three Israeli leaders

Silvia Adler<sup>1,2</sup> & Ayelet Kohn<sup>2</sup>

In 2011, a leading investigative television program in Israel launched a series of short documentaries entitled “Four Minutes,” each dedicated to an Israeli political leader. This paper focuses on three of these documentaries, dedicated to then-president Shimon Peres; then-Knesset member Tzipi Livni, who 2 years earlier had won the elections but failed to form a government, and Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the founder of the Ultra-Orthodox Sephardi “Shas” party. Our goal is to outline the means by which these films construct and deliver their condensed messages, and to explore how, despite the rigid constraints of the format, they create a cohesive and complex portrait of these political figures and their strategic agendas. We analyze how the films’ multimodal language is used to reflect the messages promoted by each of the figures as well as by the filmmakers themselves.

<sup>1</sup>Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel. <sup>2</sup>David Yellin College of Education, Jerusalem, Israel. ✉email: [silvia.adler@biu.ac.il](mailto:silvia.adler@biu.ac.il); [ayeletkohn@gmail.com](mailto:ayeletkohn@gmail.com)

## Introduction

In 2011, the Israeli TV show “Uvda” (“Fact”)—a highly prestigious and influential investigative program hosted by journalist Ilana Dayan, which has been airing continuously since 1993—launched a series of short documentaries entitled “Four Minutes,” each devoted to a prominent public figure. This paper deals with three of these documentaries, featuring political leaders who were highly influential at the time and each of whom represents a different type of leadership: (1) then-president of Israel Shimon Peres;<sup>1</sup> (2) Tzipi Livni, a center-right politician who, after the elections 2 years earlier, had been unable to form a government even though her Kadima party had won the majority of seats in the Knesset, and (3) Ovadia Yosef, the founder and long-time spiritual leader of Israel’s Sephardi ultra-Orthodox “Shas” party, who also served as the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel in 1973–1983.

Our working hypothesis is that four-minute documentaries about political figures, who tend to be controversial and enigmatic figures,<sup>2</sup> need to pack a lot of content into their short runtime. To do this successfully, their message must be multilayered and contain a significant amount of implied or coded content, conveyed through multiple modes.

Films are multimodal by nature, using a variety of communication modalities to convey meaning, at the very least the three basic modes of verbal text, image and sound.<sup>3</sup> In order to trace the meanings conveyed by a multimodal work of this sort, it is essential to examine each mode separately, but also to consider how they work together to impart content, both overt and covert. This kind of analysis is also conducive to addressing the overall tone of the film and exploring how the different modes act in concert to engage the film’s target audience. Voiceover and other forms of narration, camera shots and angles, editing and the overall cinematic language, as well as music are just a few of the techniques that serve to construct meaning and must be taken into account. It is also important to identify any underlying messages that the films seek to promote, for instance through intertextuality. Van Leeuwen (1991) highlighted the “conjunctive relations” in media texts and discussed the importance of deciphering how the different modalities—the visual track, the soundtrack and the verbal track, separately and jointly—create a cohesive structure or, when suitable, even construct discordant messages. Conjunctive relations thus operate on different levels. Not only the verbal text, but the other modalities as well, construct various categories of subordinating and non-subordinating conjunctions or logical relations.<sup>4</sup>

A quick look at our three documentaries reveals that their text is not just multilayered, but that their covert message is generally more salient than the overt one. In fact, on the overt level the films often seem superficial, uninformative and rather non-innovative. The questions put to Livni, for example, are banal, neither intrusive nor challenging. One of the questions put to Peres is blunt, but the answer remains elusive or vague, and the overall impression is that the question and answer serve the interests of Peres and the interviewer, but do not satisfy the viewer’s curiosity. In the case of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, no questions are put to the protagonist at all. In fact, there is no verbal intervention by the filmmakers, who leave it up to the viewers to extract meaning from what they see, thus creating an illusion of objectiveness. Nichols (1983) suggests that in *cinéma vérité*, a style of filmmaking that avoids voiceover narration, the viewers are invited to draw conclusions and unveil truth not only from transparent and explicit content, but to a greater extent from implicit channels. Nevertheless, it is clear that the film about Rabbi Yosef—no less than those about Livni and Peres, which mix observational passages with interviews—conveys a representation of its subject rather than an unbiased, neutral or

objective “reality.” In all three cases, the filmmakers, as well as the protagonists, actively bring their points of view to the film.

How do these four-minute films manage to draw a cohesive political portrait despite the apparent shallowness of their overt content? What clues enable the viewer to unpack their implicit messages? To put it differently, what is the basic question, motivation or premise behind the making of the films, and how do these multimodal works address this unspoken yet reconstructable motivation?

The video on Shimon Peres touches on the nature of his marital “arrangement” with his wife Sonia, which intrigued the Israeli public at the time. After Peres was elected president his wife Sonia did not join him in the official residence in Jerusalem but stayed in their private apartment in Tel-Aviv. Although the couple never officially divorced, Sonia also changed her surname to Gal, an abbreviated form of her maiden name Gelman. The questions that hover in the background of the film are therefore: Why isn’t Sonia there? What happened between them? And how does a man in his eighties manage on his own in this big, impersonal official residence? As for the video about Livni, it clearly taps into the viewers’ curiosity about her membership during the 1980s in an elite Mossad unit that was involved in important operations (in the 1970s, for example, this unit was responsible for Operation Wrath of God, aimed at eliminating individuals involved in the 1972 Munich massacre of the Israeli athletes). Finally, the video about Ovadia Yosef presents a counter-narrative to the common perception of the former chief Rabbi as a longtime manipulator of politicians across the political spectrum. From the 1980s until his death in 2013, Yosef was known for pressuring prime ministers and engineering bold political moves. He approved the participation of the Shas party in most Israeli governments, and it is commonly believed, for example, that Peres was elected president in 2007 partly thanks to his endorsement. As a religious figure, he was the supreme rabbinical authority for a large sector of the Israeli public, and was given the title of *maran*, reserved for exceptionally respected rabbis who are also influential teachers and leaders. Yosef was a colorful figure and a controversial one, who made numerous remarks that outraged parts of the Israeli public.<sup>5</sup> Against this backdrop, and aware of his age and frail health, the documentary addresses the question of manipulation, but challenges commonly held assumptions as to who is actually pulling the strings.

All three films clearly tantalize the viewers by evoking issues of keen and unsatisfied public curiosity, namely Peres’ marital difficulties, Livni’s secret security past and the reality behind the scenes of Yosef’s political manipulations. These can be thought of as the underlying premise of each film. The question, however, is how this premise is made salient without being explicitly mentioned. What are the mechanisms that allow it to stand out? Another question is whether the final products actually tackle the premise or meet the viewers’ initial expectations. Put this way, the questions are concerned less with the motivation behind the making of the films, and more with the deliberate choices of cinematic language and the strategies employed by the filmmakers to ensure a “pleasurable learning” experience (Renov 1993).

Our goal in this paper is to outline the means by which these short documentaries orchestrate their tightly packed content and deliver their underlying messages. We will therefore focus on the role of the diegetic and extradiegetic soundtrack, the shooting angles, the overall cinematic language and the editing. No less important are the objects that are saliently displayed in the films, which serve to encapsulate suggestive information about the protagonists and add depth to the political portrait. Miller (2005) argues that objects are entities that have individual “biographies”

of their own, material history that sheds light on human histories. In political speeches and performances, props may be even used as visual arguments (Kohn 2020).<sup>6</sup> The objects that play a role in our films invite the viewers to seek their relevance (Sperber and Wilson 1986; Yus 1999) to the film's message. More explicitly, based on expectations of relevance, they prompt the viewers to activate hypotheses about explicit or implicit meanings. The more contextual assumptions the audience extracts from the object displayed, the more implicit import it assumes beyond its simple materiality. In other words, the object becomes a vessel for contextual, symbolic meaning. Furthermore, these cinematic clues have a dialogic nature,<sup>7</sup> since the audience plays a role in reconstructing the overall message. Our methodology thus combines principles and practices widely used in multimodality research, social semiotics, and visual studies.

Our analysis will attempt to evaluate the extent to which the filmmakers achieve their goal of illuminating the protagonists' enigmatic personas. Identifying the diverse techniques and strategies at play will enable us to probe two major issues: (1) how the condensed messages address the premises at the basis of each documentary, and (2) how the text-image-sound relationship generates different forms of implicit content.

The paper is structured as follows: the "Three documentaries, three political figures" section will discuss each of the films in detail, deciphering the cinematic language and the message being conveyed, as well as its political significance. The "Discussion and concluding remarks" section is an integrative discussion of cinematic means at play, and how they construct the condensed message and enable the audience to discover the "hidden part of the iceberg" in the films.

### Three documentaries, three political figures

This section focuses on each of the documentaries in turn in order to expose the mechanism by which they juggle competing messages. This allows us to highlight the features of the three political figures, each representing a different type of leader: Peres, who gained fame and broad recognition only toward the end of his life; Livni, who disappointed the political hopes that had been pinned on her, and Rabbi Yosef, whose old age, according to many, disgraced his youth.

#### Shimon Peres (...and the question of productivity in old age).

The film about Peres was shot in the official presidential residence in Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> In fact, all three documentaries discussed here were filmed inside the protagonists' homes, in the manner of films in the "day in the life" genre, but not all of them achieve a sense of intimacy to the same degree. The film follows Peres' morning routine as he eats breakfast in the kitchen and then walks to his office and sits at his desk to start his day of work. The film opens with three shots almost devoid of movement, which are reminiscent of still photography and serve as an exposition and as symbolic tributes to Peres' persona:

- (1) A shot of water lilies in a pond—an intertextual reference to Monet's paintings and thus an allusion to Peres' well-known Francophilia and cultured tastes. Later the film makes another such allusion by showing that Peres reads French newspapers as part of his daily routine.
- (2) A close-up of an emblem of the State of Israel (a menorah flanked by two olive branches).
- (3) A zoom-out of the same emblem, now seen to be emblazoned on the grill of Peres' presidential vehicle (Fig. 1).

These slow, contemplative expository shots, foreshadowing Peres' reflective state of mind in the coming scenes, are followed

by a series of shots showing the residence staff scampering around, setting the stage for Peres' busy working day. Only then do we see Peres himself entering the kitchen and being served a cup of tea and a simple breakfast of bread, cottage cheese and tomatoes. Any Israeli will immediately recognize the ideal of modesty presented in this scene: a President, who can presumably have anything he wants for breakfast, opts for a basic (and also quintessentially Israeli) meal. Everything in this video is geared to show that Peres is not materialistic; the impression is of a hardworking and highly disciplined man whose purpose is to serve and contribute to his country. Peres himself replies to the interviewer's question of "Is this home?" with "This is where I live." Surprisingly, the mystery of Sonia's absence is explicitly addressed and resolved almost at once. But this question evokes a larger one, concerning Peres' old age and possible loneliness, especially living on his own in a large official residence that resembles a museum. The interviewer broaches this subject by quoting from a poem by Israeli poet David Avidan, "An old man—what does he have in his life?," thus distancing himself and Peres from what might be seen as an overly blunt question, and at the same time establishing common ground based on Peres' well known appreciation of literature and poetry. The camera constantly highlights the fact that he is isolated in vast spaces (staircases, corridors, an office shot from a wide angle). Although the interviewer insists on probing the issues of loneliness and old age, Peres navigates the discussion—after stating that "Sonia was the love of my life and it will always remain so"—to convey that he finds meaning in his busy routine and that one should never succumb to boredom or waste time on fearing the unknown future. A visual prop that soon reinforces Peres' argument in favor of an active life in old age is a bust of David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, placed prominently on Peres' desk and picked out with a close-up. Ben Gurion is presented as a predecessor and a political mentor who, like Peres, remained impressively active until his death.

Whereas the viewer, like the interviewer, may be interested primarily in the mystery of Sonia's absence, Peres quickly steers the conversation in a different direction and conveys that one is whole as long as one is active and finds meaning in life. It is Peres who navigates the interview and conveys this message to the viewers. But the headlines of the *Le monde* articles, placed on his desk at the beginning of the video, address issues of retirement. This is clearly the elephant in the room, and Peres' words may be considered an overt answer to covert, unasked questions: Isn't Peres too old to still be president? Isn't it time for him to retire?

What initially promises to be a film preoccupied with the gossipy details of Peres' failed marriage turns into a documentary about leading a productive life in old age, showing that Peres is as active and sharp as ever. Peres emerges the victor in this duel, implicitly conveying the message that his retirement is out of the question.

**Tzipi Livni (...and the ongoing issue of her relevance in the political arena).** Like the one about Peres, the film about Tzipi Livni opens with a series of expository visual and auditory props that serve to foreshadow or index the persona being portrayed:<sup>9</sup>

- (1) A chunk of raw meat in a bowl (in the background mysterious clanging and booming sounds are heard).
- (2) A large black-and-white poster of a chic woman shot from a low angle.
- (3) Wind-chimes, also shot from below (we hear their delicate ringing).
- (4) A car backing into a garage, after which the electric gate closes behind it, allowing a quick glimpse of what seems to be a street in an upscale suburb (only then, do we realize



Fig. 1 Expository shots in Peres' film.

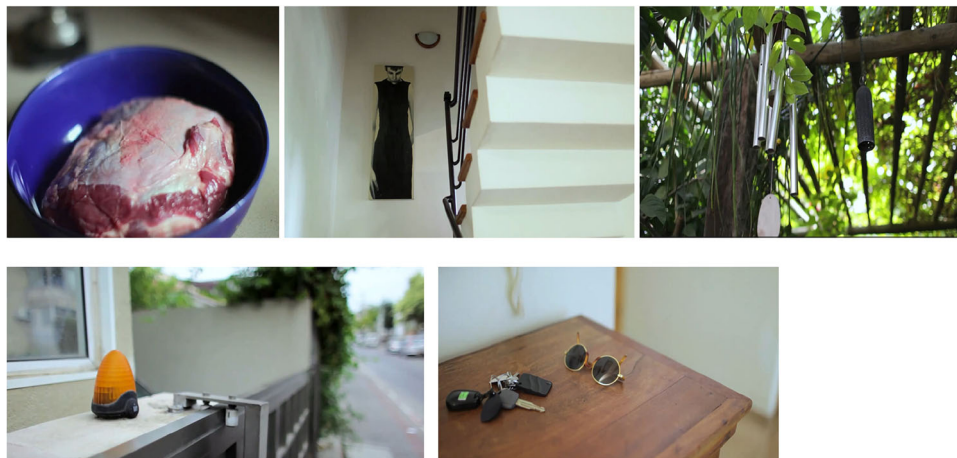


Fig. 2 Expository shots in Livni's film.



Fig. 3 Intertextual allusion to Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*.

that the clanging sounds heard in the background are probably made by the gate).

- (5) A pair of sunglasses and some keys on a small table, and a partial, blurred vision of a woman descending the stairs (Fig. 2).

This enigmatic opening, reminiscent of a thriller, is followed by a relaxed domestic scene in which Livni, barefoot and wearing a white T-shirt and jeans, enters the kitchen and turns on a tape-recorder to play an old Israeli song (“From the Songs of My Beloved Land,” a poem by Leah Goldberg set to music). The atmosphere is very different from that of a thriller... Or is it? The film-savvy viewer will soon recognize the camera angle and the physical positioning—we see Livni walking to the left and then leaning forward to turn on the music before “getting to work” (consistent with what Renov (1993) called “architectural motifs”)—as an intertextual allusion to the torture scene from Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) (Fig. 3). In Tarantino’s film, the protagonist turns on the song “Stuck in the Middle with You”<sup>10</sup> before commencing to torture his victim. But, in stark contrast to this buildup, Livni only starts preparing Shabbat dinner for her family, while explaining that she has in fact been a vegetarian since childhood.

The film deliberately builds anticipation of possible revelations about Livni’s past as a Mossad agent, especially when she states that her friends expected her to be filmed at the shooting range rather than in her kitchen.<sup>11</sup> But the viewers soon discover that they are being manipulated, and that Livni is there to deliver a speech about women juggling work and family. The viewers are curious about Livni the former Mossad agent, the politician, the tough iron lady who is regarded by many as lacking emotional intelligence. Instead, they get an ordinary domestic scene accompanied by feminist slogans as Livni encourages mothers not to give up their careers. Another example of this constant tension is the scene in which Livni, now in the comfort of her garden and wearing makeup, confidently answers a call concerning important security matters (after explaining that she sometimes hates answering phone calls because she prefers to listen to her ringtone, a song by Édith Piaf). Meanwhile, the camera focuses on a confidential document, showing only its title, “The Turkel Commission.”<sup>12</sup> The final shot of the video shows the electric gate closing, leaving the viewers outside, their curiosity unsatisfied.

The video repeatedly makes use of two cinematic means, each of which contributes in its own way to constructing Livni’s



**Fig. 4** Ovadia Yosef's posters.

persona. The first is the choice of music. As mentioned above, two songs are heard in the film. One is the song Livni plays on her tape recorder as she cooks: a lyrical Israeli song written by a female poet and sung by a female singer. The other—Livni's ringtone, which is then picked up by the soundtrack and accompanies the scene—is Piaf's "Non, je ne regrette rien" ("No, I regret nothing"). The first of the two songs expresses the poetess' love and concern for her homeland, implying that Livni too loves and is committed to Israel, even though she failed to form a government and many feel that she has let down her voters. The second song serves to imply that Livni does not regret her personal and professional choices, and, more specifically, addresses all those who still hold a grudge against her, or even feel betrayed by her, for choosing not to form a government. Livni could have formed one by accepting the demands of the orthodox parties, but chose instead to stick to her principles—a choice she is implied to be at peace with.

The second prominent cinematic technique is the use of camera angles typical of thrillers. These are angles that create fragmented settings (for example, in the beginning of the film we see a set of doors, all closed) and unusual compositions, where the protagonist is shown in extreme close-up or at the edge of the frame, causing visual discomfort. The focus on Livni's strong, repetitive movements as she chops vegetables and on the sharp sounds of the blade also contribute to the thriller-like atmosphere. In terms of the editing strategies, the film is characterized by rapid cuts, contrast between objects in focus and blurry backgrounds, and contrast between light and dark.

Unlike Peres, Livni seems very relaxed and informal. She gives the impression of flirting nonchalantly with the camera and of consciously participating in a game. Both Peres and Livni are well aware of the medium and its potential to construct personas. Both are in full control of the interview, but take very different attitudes. While Peres is distant, relies on ready-made clichés, and does not create a gap between the private and the public persona, Livni reveals a private face less familiar to the viewer. We see a fun, easygoing woman, capable of self-deprecating humor, conveying the message that her alleged failure is not the end of the world. Instead of meeting the viewers' expectations by providing answers about Livni's past, the film turns into a well-orchestrated exercise in image restoration (Benoit 1995). The message is that, even though she must now act behind the scenes, she is still pulling the strings of highly important political matters.

This "presentation of self" (Goffman 1959) is consistent with Corner (2000)'s findings about politicians as "mediated personas" who display various degrees of self-consciousness in controlling their public image and choreographing their interactions with media systems. The combined presentation of public and private personas is also consistent with Levasseur's (2000) concept of "performing identity" in video documentaries. Levasseur raises the question of whose text is presented in documentaries, given that they are collaborative products and that the presence of the camera invites a performance. She also notes the subjects' heightened consciousness and awareness not only of the roles

they play but also of the effect of these roles on the audience. Finally, Van Santen and Van Zoonen (2010) note that televised documentary portraits such as these offer politicians abundant opportunities to strategically promote their personal agendas. At the same time, these portraits are useful in assessing whether and how personal narratives contain politically-relevant information. As we shall see in the next section, the notion of "mediated persona" is also relevant for the case of Ovadia Yosef, but since the film does not incorporate any interview, the mediation mechanism will have to activate different strategies.

**Ovadia Yosef (...or: who is pulling the strings?).** The film about Ovadia Yosef<sup>13</sup> is, on the face of it, about the rabbi's busy daily routine, catering to the public's curiosity about the state of his health. This was a matter of some speculation at the time, as Yosef was in his nineties and most of his comments and views were being relayed by his close associates. Like the previous videos, this one too opens with a series of expository images, and like the Livni video it begins and ends with a similar image. In this case it is a Shas party poster on a billboard, featuring a photo of Yosef as the party's spiritual leader. In the poster he is wearing the traditional costume of the Sephardic Chief Rabbi, suggesting that he is still, indisputably, a supreme religious authority. However, the poster is faded and partly torn, thus raising the inevitable question of Yosef's ongoing relevance as a spiritual and a political leader. This suggestion is made even more clearly at the end of the video, when we see that Yosef's poster is gradually disappearing under newer ads, including one for a local contractor (Fig. 4).

Unlike in the previous two videos, in this case there is no direct interaction with the Rabbi, no interview.

The symbolic opening and closing image sets the stage for the tension that characterizes the film as a whole. On the one hand, we see Ovadia Yosef leading a busy, even hectic, routine, still serving as a spiritual guide for his community: granting audiences to numerous followers (while others queue desperately outside the door), granting blessings, advising on various matters, commenting on Halakhic issues, acting as the *sandek* at a circumcision ceremony, and so forth. We even see him ruling on an issue that preoccupied the political arena at the time. From that perspective, the overt message of the film is that the rabbi is still revered and full of vitality, a figure of unquestionable relevance to his community, to his followers and to the Shas party. On the other hand, the camera subverts this overt message by gradually and silently building up a portrait of an old, fragile and weary man, almost blind, who is led around by his associates, not only in the physical sense—because of his weak sight—but mainly because they are in charge of his impossibly overloaded schedule.

Yosef doesn't have a minute to himself. He is surrounded by constant hustle and bustle, almost unbearable even for the viewers. The camera shots create the impression of a puppet manipulated by others, suggesting that he is being cynically exploited by his followers because he is not just a person but a

symbol of religious and spiritual legitimacy. The film thus constantly raises the implicit question of who is really pulling the strings. It does not provide a conclusive answer but lets the viewers draw their own conclusions.

### Discussion and concluding remarks

Our initial working hypothesis was that the rigid format of a four-minute documentary would compel the filmmakers to pack a very condensed and layered message into the available time. This hypothesis is especially relevant in our case because the subjects of these documentaries are not just prominent political figures, who are an object of public interest at any time, but figures at an intriguing period of their lives: Peres and Yosef were in the twilight of their illustrious public careers, while Livni was “between jobs,” as it were, having disappointed the hopes of her voters to see her as prime minister. Being multimodal, films are suited to handling such complexity, for each modality can contribute to the construction of a condensed, compact message and encode encapsulated meaning.

In all three films, the underlying question—jibing with the audience’s curiosity at the time—remains without a clear answer. Instead, the viewers are presented with more complex and ambivalent messages. Peres cunningly teaches the viewers a lesson about the irrelevance of gossip and takes the stage to convey that he is still perfectly able, despite his advanced years, to play an active role in the political arena. Livni seems to be acutely aware of her intriguing image as a former Mossad agent, and seems to toy with the viewers by piquing their curiosity without satisfying it. At the same time, she too seizes the stage not only to promote a softer and more feminine side of herself but also, and perhaps mainly, to convey that she is still active and involved in sensitive state affairs. Viewers—including those who are disappointed with Livni’s failure to fulfill her electoral promises—receive the message that she is just waiting for the right opportunity to return to the center of the political stage.

In the case of the third video, there are grounds to wonder whether Ovadia Yosef and the film director share the same goals. The director uses the tools at his disposal to reveal the old rabbi’s vulnerability and to portray him, ambiguously, as a man who is still a leader yet seems to be led by others. At the same time, one suspects that Yosef’s willingness to have the film made is, in itself, a sign that he is still in charge and still pulling the strings. As an experienced, strategic politician, it is highly probable that his appearance in this film was part of a conscious effort to secure his legacy and convey that Shas was robust and functional and would persevere after his death. In other words, even if the film delivers an ambivalent message by creating tension between Ovadia Yosef as a frail old man and the “brand” of Maran Ovadia Yosef, the answer to the riddle may lie outside the film, in Yosef’s strategic decision to allow himself to be filmed as a private individual.

The analysis proposed here sought to identify the diverse mechanisms at play in each film, and to explore how the condensed messages address the premise of each documentary and how implicit content is generated through multimodal means. We saw that the multimodal means indeed play a central role in constructing the messages and characterizing each of the personas. The accessories and props, for instance, sometimes serve the context through their symbolic value, and at other times relate directly to the protagonists by scaffolding their idiosyncratic characteristics. The film about Peres, for example, displays presidential and state symbols alongside symbols that reference his character as a citizen of the world. Other objects in his surroundings reflect the values he lives by, such as his meal in the breakfast scene, which conveys that he has remained modest and eschews an extravagant lifestyle. In the case of

Livni, there is a distinction between props that directly stoke the viewers’ curiosity and ones that reflect Livni’s enigmatic personality. The opening gate at the beginning of the film may be seen as a promise for answers, while the closing gate at the end highlights the director’s failure to extract these answers. The meat and the dark sunglasses specifically reference Livni’s mysterious past. Finally, in the case of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, all the objects that appear in the film bear symbolic meaning: ritual and religious articles serve as evidence that Yosef’s entire life is dedicated to the public.

In terms of sound, we must distinguish between the diegetic and the extradiegetic levels. In the films about Peres and Yosef, there is constant movement between a generic background music (piano music in the first case and string music in the second) and sporadic amplified sounds of the daily routine. In the Livni film, the amplified ominous background sounds alternate with the song on the tape and the ringtone, which allude to her personal agendas and beliefs. Livni’s film is the only one that incorporates two songs that reflect the protagonist’s credo. They convey that Livni is still devoted to her country, although she is pained by its condition, and also that she does not regret her decisions. In the Peres film, the “elevator music” in the background accentuates the viewers’ feeling that Peres is delivering clichés and general truths while avoiding talking in the first person. In the Yosef film, the diegetic sounds create constant unease, and the background music serves to normalize and smooth this chaos.

In terms of the camerawork, we noticed in all three films an interesting use of still-like video shots, reminiscent of pictures in a photo album, which allow the viewers to pause and contemplate, to sum up the clues and draw conclusions. Shooting angles also play a central role in creating atmosphere and mood: unease in the case of Ovadia Yosef, a sense of loneliness and alienation in the case of Peres, and suspense in the case of Livni. In terms of Nichols’ (2001) taxonomy, all three films have some characteristics of the observational documentary. This is especially true of the video about Yosef, which mostly uses the “fly on the wall” approach. However, all three films, and in particular the ones about Livni and Peres, also combine characteristics of Nichols’ five other modes: expository, participatory, reflexive, performative and poetic.

In conclusion, we see that the overt messages conveyed by these short, condensed films are only the tip of the iceberg, while the covert messages, outlined in this multimodal analysis, are the main point of the films. In fact, these covert layers divert the films from their expected course and present an alternative to the initial questions that intrigued the audience. In a broader perspective, and as a result of our analysis, a comprehensive multimodal analysis should consider not only how the various modalities shape the message but also the potential for subversiveness within overt messages.

### Data availability

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article. Screenshots were taken from these links: Peres’ video: [https://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana\\_dayan/four-minutes-video/Video-ce688791c665d21006.htm](https://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana_dayan/four-minutes-video/Video-ce688791c665d21006.htm); Livni’s video: [https://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana\\_dayan/four-minutes-video/Video-412dc7c6d489d21006.htm](https://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana_dayan/four-minutes-video/Video-412dc7c6d489d21006.htm); Tarantino’s Reservoir Dogs (1992)/ “Stuck in the Middle With You” scene: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIMg2Xw4\\_8s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIMg2Xw4_8s); Ovadia Yosef’s video: [https://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana\\_dayan/four-minutes-video/Video-e84e3efe8397d21006.htm](https://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana_dayan/four-minutes-video/Video-e84e3efe8397d21006.htm).

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## Notes

- 1 The president is Israel's ceremonial head of state; Peres held this position in 2007–2014.
- 2 “Enigmatic” in the sense of an unsolved biographical issue connected to each one of the characters at the time of the film's release.
- 3 Mitchell (1994), Van Leeuwen (1991), Norris (2004), Bateman (2008), Kress (2010), Jewitt (2013), Hiippala (2014), White (2014), Roque (2017), Bezemer and Jewitt (2018).
- 4 For instance, elaborating or explanatory conjunctions, distilling conjunctions, paraphrasing conjunctions, etc.
- 5 For instance, during a sermon he delivered on October 16, 2010, Rabbi Yosef reportedly said, “Gentiles were born only to serve us [...] only to serve the People of Israel [...] Why are gentiles needed? They will work, they will plow, they will reap.” This hateful and divisive rhetoric drew condemnation from the Anti-Defamation League, among others. Yosef expressed similar intolerant ideas about secular Israelis.
- 6 See also Groarke (2017), Groarke (2017) on multimodal argumentation.
- 7 Dialogicity, in the Bakhtinian sense, refers to the fact that “something created is always created of something given” (Bakhtin 1986:120). According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958), every communicative action constructs and targets an addressee.
- 8 [https://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana\\_dayan/four-minutes-video/Video-ce688791c665d21006.htm](https://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana_dayan/four-minutes-video/Video-ce688791c665d21006.htm).
- 9 [https://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana\\_dayan/four-minutes-video/Video-412dc7c6d489d21006.htm](https://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana_dayan/four-minutes-video/Video-412dc7c6d489d21006.htm).
- 10 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIMg2Xw4\\_8s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIMg2Xw4_8s).
- 11 In Hebrew, the two words are phonetically similar: *mitvakh* (shooting range) vs. *mitbakh* (kitchen).
- 12 A public commission set up by the Israeli government to investigate the May 31, 2010 Gaza flotilla incident.
- 13 [https://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana\\_dayan/four-minutes-video/Video-e84e3efe8397d21006.htm](https://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana_dayan/four-minutes-video/Video-e84e3efe8397d21006.htm).

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## Author contributions

Both authors are researchers of multimodal texts and engage with political texts such as political speeches and political campaign ads.

## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

## Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

## Informed consent

Informed consent was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

## Additional information

**Correspondence** and requests for materials should be addressed to Silvia Adler or Ayelet Kohn.

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