

**Roz Chast's *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant* (2014) and Kawthar Younis's "A Present from the Past" (2016) as Multimodal Narratives of Old Age**

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates Roz Chast's graphic novel *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant* (2014) and Kawthar Younis's feature-length documentary "A Present from the Past" (2016). Both works provide narratives of old age based on actual events. Chast's work chronicles the experience of the famous cartoonist as she takes care of her ageing parents while Younis' documentary discusses the journey of a daughter with her elderly father in search of his first love who lives in Italy. Created by female artists who confuse the role of creator and character, both works reveal the complexities and ambiguities of ageing through the lenses of gendered story telling. The paper posits the following questions: How can the modes of sequential arts and visual narrative give utterance to new poetics of ageing, particularly through exploring the interaction between the generic features of these modes (such as temporality, comedy, and journeying) and aspects of the ageing experience such as resilience, infantilisation, defiance of ageing, and perception of the ageing body. The paper further contends that, through their intergenerational dimension, these stories reevaluate the underlying, fixed patterns of the perception of old age. Finally, the paper investigates the insights offered through a cross cultural examination of works about ageing that belong to different

cultures, in this case Middle East and American. Surveying earlier literary works by female writers in which ageing people take precedence such as Simone de Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse* and Latifa El Zayat's *Ageing*, the first part of the paper attempts a theoretical framework that synthesizes this survey with the givens of critical gerontology (which encompasses literary gerontology and narrative gerontology) as suggested by Holstein (2007), Hepworth (2000), Woodward (2006), and Wyatt-Brown as well as theories of visual narrative and documentary genres structures proposed by Eisner (1996) and Cohn (2013). The second part of the paper explores the techniques of storying adopted by Chast and Younis as they relate to their respective modes/genres. The final part of the paper examines the gender, intergenerational and cross cultural aspects in both works thus evaluating the interplay of the subjective with the global aspects of old age. Taking these issues into consideration the paper attempts to prove that a consideration of ageing narratives across modes and genres enhances Simone de Beauvoir's remark that "it is this old age that makes it clear that everything has to be reconsidered, recast from the very beginning. That is why the whole problem is so carefully passed over in silence: and that is why this silence has to be shattered".

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In 2013, the United Nations issued a report on 'World Population Ageing 2013' stating that the "world's population aged 80 years or over has increased from 8 percent in 1950 to 12 percent in 2013". However, studies on creative works concerned with aging in general, and with cross-cultural aging in particular, are still largely lacking. In their introduction to a 2017 special issue on "Screening Old Age", Dollan and Hallam lament a recognized lack of scholarly work on screening old age, observing a "long overdue scholarly interest" in "film and television productions that feature aging protagonists played by aging actors" (119). The Arab world shows even less academic attention to creative works on aging, with very few exceptions that tackle pioneering works such as Latifa al Zayyat's *Aging*, 1974, and Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Sur Ma Mère* 2006. In the media, the depiction of old age is often restricted to the graceful senior figures avoiding grimmer facts of physical, psychological, or mental decline. Lapse in creative and scholarly interest in aging has also to do with the status allotted to humanities in gerontological studies. Since its impact cannot be materialized in concrete results, its contribution to gerontological studies is usually contested. Cole nicely summarizes this situation when he notes that "contributions from the humanities are often seen as "soft" and "unscientific" and thus subjected to unduly brisk critique when submitted to mainstream gerontological journals...

Gerontology remains committed—however unwittingly—to a medical-empirical paradigm of aging as, at base, "a problem to be solved" (Cole 241).

There is therefore an increasingly recognized need for more research on aging, not only as a topic within the discipline of humanities, but also as a compelling topic within the multimodal domain. In this context, the present paper proposes a comparison between the depiction of old age in two contemporary multimodal narratives: Roz Chast's non-fiction graphic documentary *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant* (2014) and Kawthar Younis's feature-length documentary film "A Present from the Past" (2016). Chast's graphic documentary was a finalist of the 2014 National Book Award, won the 2014 National Book Critics Circle Award, and the 2014 Kirkus Prize in nonfiction. Younis's documentary also received international recognition, including the Cairo International Film Festival award in 2015 and the Alfilm Festival award, Berlin 2016. Based on real events, Chast's work chronicles a two-year experience of taking care of her nonagenarian parents. Likewise, Younis's documentary relates details of a journey to Italy during which she accompanies her septuagenarian father in search of his first love whom he left more than thirty years ago. The study investigates how these narratives, being intergenerational, multimodal, and cross-cultural, explore issues related to the

narration of the aging. How does multimodal narrative affect our perception and reaction to the aging body? What multimodal tools are employed in such a depiction? How could the intergenerational, cross-cultural dimension influence this perception? To address these questions, the paper proposes a reading based on the interplay of Genette's narrative theory and the perspectives suggested by experiential narrative forwarded by Hutto and Caracciolo. The purpose of the paper is to throw light on how experiential narrative theory contributes to reveal further potentials of documentary comics and feature-length documentary film as genres of old age narratives. The first part of the paper defines the narrative premises of experiential narrative theory. The remainder of the paper applies these premises to the works under study, with particular emphasis on their evaluative and interpretative features, strategies of engaging readers, multimodal depiction of embodied emotion, and the multimodal rendition of experiential spaces of old age.

Experiential aspects of aging necessitate prior distinction between representation and experience. Jan-Noël Thon offers, in *Transmedial Narratology*, several terms that indicate that the difference between verbal and visual representation. Verbal presentation is "conceptual, "referential", "propositional", while and "perceptual" aspects characterize visual representations. Caracciolo accepts this distinction, but expresses reservations regarding the consideration of representation as an overarching category. Caracciolo explains that while representation is the domain of conceptual and semiotic reference, experience is a cognitive medium that precludes referentiality. Experience is

perceived through basic movement, color, sensual perception and emotions, which could be revealed gradually via degrees of intensity (2014, 58). Hutto classifies this type of perception as rudimentary, i.e. it cannot be explained through object-based schema. In other words, basic experience, unlike objects, people, or events, is non-conceptual, and cannot therefore be represented through semiotic or mental representation (17-19).

In a 2011 talk on "Narrative, Embodiment and Cognitive Science" Caracciolo surveys the development of the experiential approach to narrative. This approach started in the last decade of the twentieth century and discussed how perception of our body affects engagement and response to our reading experience of narrative. Caracciolo mentions that according to David Couzens Hoy there are certain bodily responses such as pain that all people share, regardless of their respective cultures. Hoy uses the term "invariants" to qualify these universal responses (2). Caracciolo also refers to the philosopher Mark Johnson who elaborates that the human body interacts with the world in five ways: biological, ecological, phenomenological, social, and cultural. Johnson adds that narrative belongs to the social and cultural context. A major contribution in that direction has been Monika Fludernik's discussion, in 1996, of the link between narrative and embodied experience. Caracciolo mentions that the idea that experience involves not only embodiment but also an evaluative process. Has been discussed by Varela, who believed that evaluation comes from stored cultural and social values, or what he termed "the evaluative background". Caracciolo illustrates this evaluative quality characterizes the reader's reading experience which involves two stages of "conscious attribution" and "conscious enactment". By these terms Caracciolo

refers to the reader’s “stance towards the characters” and an “imagined undergoing” of the character experience in the first person respectively. The “story –driven experience” is therefore both evaluative and simulative. Caracciolo maintains that intersubjective dialogue between diegetic narrators could also be considered as a variation of the reading experience. In her discussion of documentary comics Nina Mickwitz considers that firsthand involvement, as performer or witness, is the basic distinctive feature of documentary multimodal genre (19). According to this reading both Chast and Younis are witnesses of their parents’ aging experience. Witnessing could also be categorized as a kind of engaged, experiential reading of a multimodal narrative. As they introduce their intergenerational experience, Chast and Younis also narrate several stages of evaluation and simulation that they went through as a reaction towards that experience. The theory of experiential embodiment offers rewarding insights that could enlighten our understanding of this response. Instead of representing events, experiential narrative conveys a “how-it-feels-like” approach. Herman offers the

term “qualia” to refer to this type of expression (Caracciolo 144-145).

The two texts under study express how it feels to accompany your parents as they move further towards old age. As participants in such an experience, the two daughters, Roz and Kawthar, not only witness their parents’ experience, but also interpret it in terms that expand their own awareness of aging and its complicated reactions. As mentioned earlier, experiential sharing, whether on the level of co-participants, or that of readers, is pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic. Multimodal documentary, with its tools of image and sound, contribute significantly to unleash these possibilities.

In Chast’s narrative, the major conflict is between two ways of perception; one is non-conceptual, phenomenal and basic, while the other is physical and representative. The parents understand the world experientially, figuratively, and in an embodied manner. Their view of aging rejects pragmatic arrangements. They simply accept death as another phenomenal mystery that they intuitively know, but would not put into words.



Figure (1) Roz Chast’s *Can’t We Talk about Something More Pleasant*. Bloomsbury, 2014, p.38.

In figure (1) Chast underscores this difference through three parallel panels. The central panel combines death and money into one image that expresses the parent's most dreaded topics. The panel on the left represents the linguistic realm of arbitrary reference. It simply contains no image, only text. The panel on the right conveys the daughter's attempt to combine both approaches. In this panel the parents express an amazed gesture as a presumed reaction to the accompanying text that mentions various death arrangements. Speechless facial expression, with the mouth widely open, is an embodiment of

the parents' sense of dismay. Together, the panels are expressive of the experiential and the representative dichotomy, which is obviously the core of the conflict. Figure (2) represents the daughter's conviction that they have to "deal with this "aging thing." Action is emphasized by the crossing of the "moving sidewalk of life" (p.10). Chast draws road signs, with her parents, with neutral facial expression, standing in a prophetic order that indicates that her father will be the first to depart. The position of the daughter indicates her role not as a companion, but more of a facilitator.

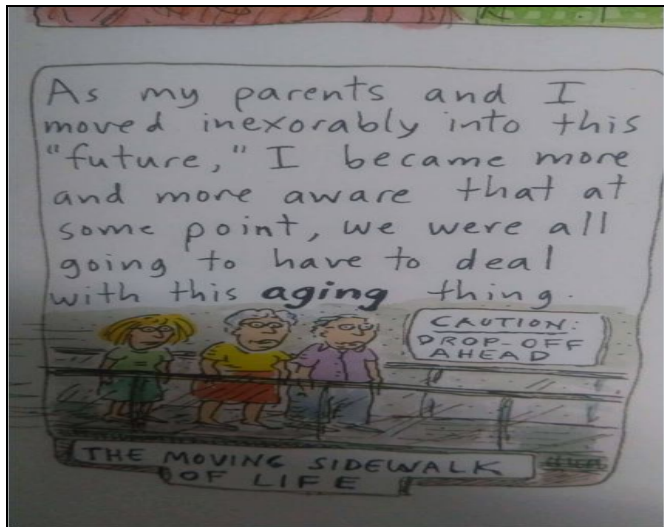


Figure (2) Roz Chast's *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant*. Bloomsbury, 2014, p.10.

Text-image disjunction is another technique that Chast uses to comment on her role in the last stages of her parents' lives (Sattler 209-11). As she receives medical details of her parents health condition, she conceives an image of the parents sliding down a speedy sloop, while she appears on the side track, trying, in

vain, to stop their fall. The image component in this panel is fictitious, (Figure 3), and reflects the three basic levels experiential embodiment: motion (sliding down a snowy sloppy hill); visual perception, color (the cold white snow implying psychological loneliness), and sound (the letter sound "AAAAAAA" expressing her cry). Again, however, the

facial expression of the parents is neutral, as they seem untroubled by the danger. The parents accept death, but they would

confront it in their own way. The interference of the daughter disrupts their piece of mind. She is imposing her will on the last phase of their existence.

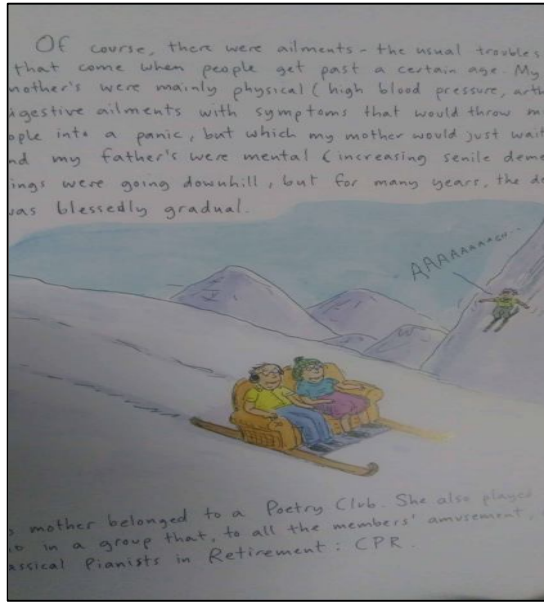


Figure (3) Roz Chast *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant*. Bloomsbury, 2014, p.27.

The chapter “The Old Apartment” is basically evaluative. Recorded image is the dominant technique Chast employs to express the evacuation process of the parent’s apartment. This part displays an actual photo gallery of the items the daughter chooses to give up, in contrast to those she decides to keep, which are rendered as drawings. Currie explains that while photography is a “trace”, drawing is a “testimony”. As traces, photos function as items “represented in origin”. Still, when they become contextualized within the drawing, they are transformed to the category of “represented in use” ( Currie 270). Chast employs this technique to authenticate the testimonial aspects of her experience. What is beyond Chast’s perception of the experience, however, is

the justification of keeping all these items which are unneeded at least from her perspective. Chast is unable to locate the embodied bond between these items and her parents’ life. These items were part of their existence, even if they are, from a representation perspective, a heap of hardly- needed items. The inability to regulate and organize is a characteristic of the dwindling of the parents’ physical conditions. But they live in harmony with that. They accept their vulnerability. It is the daughter who rejects it, hence her frustration. The apartment episode reveals that to her it is a space where her parents are located. To them, however, the apartment is an embodiment of their existence. It decays as they decay, and they are not offended by that.

As the narrative progresses, Chast's awareness of old age experience expands significantly. Seeing how her parents' savings made it financially possible for them to move to a seniors care house, Chast undergoes a resetting of her priorities. When she realizes the amount of her parents' personal belongings that she had to dispense with, she reconsiders issues such as ads addressed to the young who "are less likely to have gone through the transformative process of cleaning out their deceased parents stuff" (p.122). When Chast thinks of the effort that could overburden her children when one day they would have to clean out *her* belonging, she embodies her parents' experience.

Freeman refers to a condition of "narrative foreclosure" which he defines as "the premature conviction that one's life story has effectively ended" (83). Within the frame of foreclosure, it sounds futile to invest time in narrating aging which is generically conceived as a mere prelude to dying. Randall, in a study on spirituality and old age stories, explains that narrative foreclosure could be effectively challenged by "developing a good, strong story-work [that helps] older adults in expanding, examining, transforming, and eventually transcending the stories by which they live". In a book on the poetics of aging Randall and McKim introduce the alternative concept of "narrative openness", an option which differentiates between a biological "built-in limit to our life (120 years, give or take)" and unlimited creativity [where] there is ... no necessary endpoint to our narrative development" (754). The impact of intergenerational experience has been tackled by gerontologists such as Robert Yahnke and Margerte Gullette. While

Yahnke connects "regeneration and degeneration" of old age to the degree senior subjects enjoy intergenerational relations, Margerte Gullette, in *Aged by Culture* classifies narrative in relation to age into two types: narrative of decline and narrative of progress. Likewise, Younis refuses to accept the interpretation of aging as synonymous to life ending. On the contrary, the father is resigned and willing to accept the socially –constructed image of what is expected of an old man approaching his demise. In fact the father repeatedly mentions arrangements he makes in preparation to his death, which he feels is imminent. In a telling scene the father imagines to shoot the other cars that pass him by, but he never asks his daughter to drive faster, or to drive himself. (Later on we see him driving as he heads to the airport). In a continuous dialogue with her father, Younis objects to the way her father adheres to these social norms, asking him to learn how to handle his cell phone and to learn to use the internet. By the same token, the daughter is unable to solve the riddle of the pacified attitude of her father. Why is he hesitant? Why is he passive? Why did he leave his beloved? Why did not he return to her? All these questions remain unanswered.

Unlike Chast's narrative, the whole journey initiative is an attempt to expose the father to this regenerative effect, a point that the wife fully understands and acknowledges when she agrees to allow him to travel. The father repeatedly uses the term "revived" in this context, as if he was spiritually dead. The daughter imposes the journey on the father who is ostensibly pleased with the illusion of a possible revisit of the past, but simultaneously he feels that his body and spirit are lagging behind. He repeatedly

objects to the daughter's insistence to impose her will upon all the details of the journey. The main argument scene that they have in Italy reflects this anxiety over her constant intrusion. Depiction of embodied details shapes our reactions as viewers. We sympathize with the father's pain as he roams the streets. We sympathize with his childish love of soft drinks and his inability to keep his shirt clean. We are not very impressed with the reunion scene in which cultural difference is felt to the utmost, as we compare the father's anxiety as he hurries to meet his past love, to the attitude of Patricia, who chooses to wait for Mokhtar, while eating an apple, to which she tenaciously holds till the meeting. As viewers we are frustrated to find that after covering all that distance, she does not even invite him to her residence. Actually Patricia is reluctant to put the ring back in her finger. The scene is somehow reductive, and the impression of the close up shot of the father who mysteriously silent, drowsy, and fatigued is not exactly the happy conclusion the audience would expect. It could be legitimate to suspect that the encounter was rather frustrating to the father too. The dominant emotion in both narratives is therefore one of resentment. The parents resent their daughters' interference, and the daughters are sometimes overwhelmed by their caring duties.

In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud suggests that the expression of emotion is one of the basic functions of communication in comics, and he relates this expression basically to potentiality of the image to convey "a large number of secondary emotions combinations (31). As revealed in figure (4), Chast uses the iconic potentialities of letters and

punctuation as an alternative to vocal expression. This is a cross domain technique that McCloud refers to as an example of "conflated sensory perception" where "the shape and scale of letters on the page represents the quality and magnitude of the sound as it would be perceived by the auditory system" (Potsch 18). As such, Chast's employment of text variations (bold capitalization, underlining, filling, inking) reveals strong emotional reaction, usually negative. Capitalization, drawn with curved lines, expresses emotional charge, stress and voice intonation. On the other hand, patterns of underlining, such as single, double straight, hierarchical, and forked lines, all testify to different types of emphasis. The filling of capitalized letters with curved lines, like barbed wires, is usually employed for moments of suffering and misery, while intersecting, cross-like underlining suggests a conflict and mutual detest. Underlining with a straight line braided with a curved one refers to either dilemma, or undefined, illogical urge.

In addition to letters and characters, Chast uses colors as belonging to the specific area of "incommensurable non-conceptual" experience which communicates a wordless sense of a how-it-feels-like condition (Hutto 16). Yellow is always associated with the mother's gradual health deterioration, while grey is the color dominating the hospitalization panels. Greyness also dominates the panels of the father's last days. It enhances the silence of that strained moment. The other color variation that is associated with the idea of time in Chast's narrative is suggested in the black-and white panels, used to mark recollection of traumatic moments in the past (like the moment of



learning about the September 11 attacks, or of the frustration Chast experiences over her parents not using the heater she sends them because it has a three-prong cable). Black-and-white is also used to depict bizarre moments of the narrator's life, like the one when she undergoes an Ouija experience. Being of a systemized, rational mentality, Chast employs color to refer to domains of perception that are inexpressible.

Sattler suggests that comics artists can "encode feelings in frames", thus creating "comics within comics" (217). Similarly, Chast introduces several frames that are not traditional, like the frame composed of the letters her parents exchanged in their war correspondence, and the circular frame of thought bubbles that reveal how she felt as she is making up her mind whether to leave her parent's apartment or not. In chapter (8) "The end of an era", Chast uses frameless panels, a technique first developed by Japanese and Asian comics, or manga. As Stein suggests, frameless panels are characterized by "narrative ambiguities", or what is known as "Manga's ghostliness" (15). Employment of indeterminate frames prevails, in correspondence to a mood of reluctance and uncertainty. On the other hand, Petersen explains that the splash page

technique, first introduced by Eisner, is a type of mono-scenic narratives where the whole page would be turned into a single larger image that "illustrates ...important moments in the story, distilling the conflict, and setting the mood for what was to come" (90). Chast uses splash page to express her father's happiness with the return of his wife after being hospitalized. As James Davidge puts it, splash pages reflect the relief of stress. She also uses exclamation marks, emanata (drops of sweat, tears in the father's eyes) body language (shaking hands, widely open mouth) to further convey the experiential embodied dimension.

In comparison, Younis's feature-film documentary finds the father's emotions problematic. Adhering to his oriental culture, his inner thoughts and feelings are rarely explicit; exploring the world of the father is thus carried out through the physical presence of the father. As a focalizer the daughter, and movie maker, uses various external focalization techniques that range between vision-from-behind (as in the Roma car scene) and vision-with, (characteristic of the scenes of his search for Patricia). "Zoom in" is also used as a register of possible reaction at heightened moments of emotional intensity.



Figure (4) Roz Chast *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant*. Bloomsbury, 2014, p.27.

The appearance of the father in the first scene of the documentary is preceded by J-cut split, an editing tool in which the audio track precedes the visual cut. The typical function of the J-cut tool is to create anticipation (Hurbis-Cherrier 154). The viewers hear the sound of door opening and of keys clicking before they see the father closing the house's front gate. The contrast between the sounds heard and the action seen, i.e. between unfolding and closure, anticipates the conflict between the generative ambition of the daughter, and her father who prefers to keep his realm/world enclosed. The tilting camera position of the first scene hints to the awkwardness of the footage, but also suggests the turbulence such a conflict would provoke. The fight scene between Kawthar and her father in Rome is followed by a drastic and violent tilting of the camera, thus expressing anger and bitterness.

Younis adopts a fly-on-the-wall, "follow one character" focalization. It is "an observation technique where you can place yourself in a non-obtrusive position and observe from a distance. This is especially helpful in situations in which observations can affect user behavior" (Biesterfeld 2). But it is different from the omniscient focalization in that it is limited to the position of observation. It does not entail claims of full knowledge of the character's inner and external world. In terms of cinematic effect, the fly on the wall technique delays understanding of the character's inner self and creates suspense. Most of shots range between medium, quasi close up, and a worm's eye perspective. Traditionally, worm's eye perspective endows the viewed subject with an aura of power. Yet the recipients cannot help but notice the father's physical fragility. The father is vulnerable. He walks slowly, has his legs put up over a

body of cloth to ease the pain, and often looks fatigued. The worm's eye perspective directs us instead to observe, and admire, his talent of simplifying and enjoying life, regardless of the pain. He claps his hand in enthusiasm, and enjoys eating ice cream and mango in child-like exhilaration.

A significant intersection point between experiential and Genette's narrative theories refers to directing the reader towards more engagement with the text. Experiential theory proposes the technique of points of attention that the author repeatedly uses to enhance familiarity with the narrative through stirring the reader's reservoir of shared and similar background. Genette in *Narrative Discourse* relates a similar process of narrative frequency which he classifies into the iterative and the ritual types. By iterative narrative Genette refers to a single narrative occasion that narrates several analogous events. Genette divides iteration into temporal and spatial and introduces ritualistic frequency as referring to several "narrative statements" about the same event, a technique that allows for a variety of styles and view points (113-125). My contention is that we can apply both Genette's concept of frequency and experiential joint points of attention to explain how Chast and Younis engage the readers' participation in the narrative experience. To achieve this objective, Chast employs temporal iteration that activates the reader's consciousness of the impact of time on a certain aspect of the world of a given diegetic characters. Younis, on the other hand, establishes a series of spatial ritual scenes that she associates with particular character moods.

Their adaptation of these techniques adds an embodied perspective that endorses experiential reading. Chast employs frequency to delineate the degenerative aspects of the regenerative/degenerative typology. Younis, on the other hand, adopts the ritual frequency to tackle the regenerative aspect of that formula. Embodied frequency and joint points of attention refer to the accumulation of the "feel" of experience through repeatedly directing the recipient's attention to a particular "focus point", situation, or a "specific feature of the story world" (Caracciolo 2011 2, Herman 252).

Chast's text offers a considerable number of panels that signal out the same setting item, the sofa, on which the parents usually sit while the daughter is present. With every depiction of the sofa scene, reader gains access to further and deeper insight into aspects of Chast's intergenerational experience. With implications of marked disagreement, the title and cover pages depict the parents sitting on the sofa, while the daughter sits at a considerable distance. This is followed by an integrated photo of the parents, again on a sofa, with their little girl in between. The scene is repeated on page 36, but with an alteration of reactions. At this time the daughter compulsorily sits between the parents. The associated feeling is quite differed. The same panel is repeated on page 44 which is a flash back showing the daughter standing opposite the parents, in a gesture of defiance, as she employs the phrase "settling scores". Here it refers to their tense parents-daughter relationship. The final coach panel is that of the death reaper, who now occupies the coach while the parents are gone.



Figure (5) Examples of coach panels in Roz Chast's *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

The other example of repeated sequence is that of the portrait panels which Chast draws to register her mother's last moments. The image of the mother's contracted face as she suffers the death thralls is page length and frameless, focusing completely on the experiential perception of that dying body, on a level where language or verbal expression are simply non-functional. The journey or forward spatial movement in Chast's narrative centers round the parents

leaving their residence and moving to a center for seniors care giving to which Chast refers as the "Place". This spatial shift is initiated by temporal development, i.e. getting older or aging, which is defined as a move into the future towards the bleak future, predictably towards death (Hans-Werner 307). Frameless panels indicate the passage of time, feebleness, and inevitability. This rendition records as well as immortalizes a moment or a stage of aging that is seldom in focus.

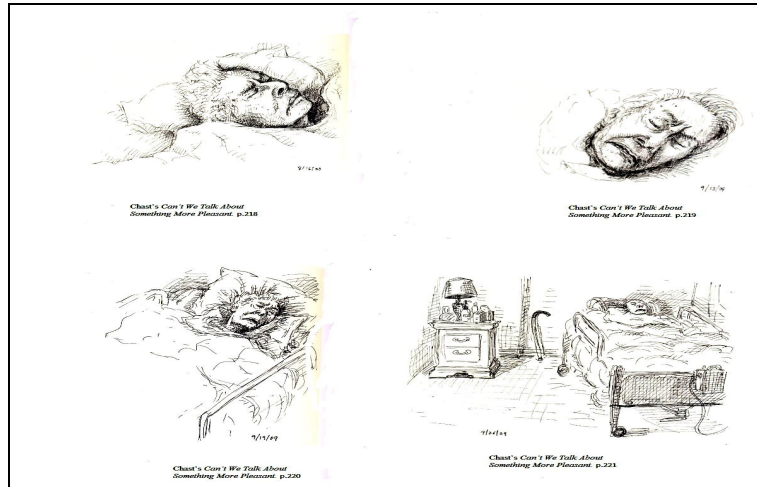


Figure (6) Roz Chast's *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

Comparatively, Younis offers ritualistic repetition of more than ten shots of her father lying on bed, five shots in which he is in the car, together with shots in other means of transportations, the plane, the metro, the train. The car and transportation scenes function as transitory, leading to the more kinetic walking scenes. The shots depicting the father as actually walking mostly take longer duration and are far more frequent in association with the Italy part of the narration. In terms of experiential theory this techniques invites the reader to consider all aspects of the event, hence reaching a fuller understanding.

But the major example of joint attention ritualistic situation is that of the father lying on bed (figure7). With the camera always very close to his feet which are raised over a pile of cloth to prevent edema, the father's figure becomes the embodiment of disproportional, caricature-like, paradoxical condition of physical vulnerability and emotional robustness. Inference of the father's sentiments is possible through the in- bed diegetic songs

and music that the father listens to and chants. The employment of diegetic song as a preferred medium of expression is frequently repeated in this context. The fact that he enjoys music and lyrics despite being worn out is a clue to his temperament. The songs not only reveal the mood of the narrator, but also recount their own narratives that almost always intersect with the father's. Songs help us infer the complicated disposition of the father, who is both open-minded and reserved, who prefers to express his feelings through songs, rather than utter them explicitly. These intersected voices are classified as voice out and voice through. Serge Daney illustrates that the voice *out* that comes out of the "filmed body" is "problematic and complicated", while the voice *through* by which Daney refers to the voice that "originates from the image but does not emanate from the mouth", reflects "a status that is ambiguous and enigmatic" (475). In all cases, as Chamarette reiterates, the two types indicate "a non-neutral presence" or "traced embodiment of subjectivity" (94). Another example is that of the father and

daughter as they happily prepare their travel documents, singing together the popular song (الدنيا ريشة في هوا) (“This world but a feather tossed in the air”) while the father simulates a correspondence between the lyrics and the course of events. Voice as an element of narrative is therefore prominent, whether as a voice out or a voice through.

The father is gradually restored to life. More and more he gets to move, even though clumsily and heavily at first, as he searches for the photos and letter of Patricia. Other symptoms include visiting the dentist clinic, trying to do exercises, and happily eating mangoes he used store, actions that symbolically indicate a return to life. He is depicted on his way to the airport, driving the car himself, clapping his hands in a childish gesture of joy, carrying his own luggage, even though with difficulty. This inclination towards motion contrasts with previous scenes where he sits next to the driver, not assuming leadership or taking initiative. The father’s corporeality helps reveal the conflict between the father’s conservative background and his outgoing nature.

The car ride scene is repeated four times in the pre-travel stage and once in the travel journey. It always involves a dialogue and explores the world of the father cautiously, introducing his characteristic features to the viewer: we have details of his job, his memories of his

stay in Rome, and of his reluctance to expose his inner thoughts and feelings. The Roma car scene is represented through the camera-avec technique which helps the viewer to share what the father sees, while the Cairo car scenes are given through a warm’s eye perspective suggestive of a mystery. Subjectivity in “A Present from the Past” examines the validity of the concept of the ageless self. As Lipscomb explains, the ageless selves “report a sense of alienation from their aged bodies, to the point of a flash of misrecognition of their mirror images. Lipscomb cites Kathleen Woodward who “theorizes this reaction as the mirror stage of old age, an inversion of Jacque Lacan’s mirror stage of infancy. While Lacan’s mirror stage focuses on the infant’s embracing and identifying with the seemingly whole, pleasing mirror image... Woodward points out that the mirror stage of old age is a rejection of the mirror image, representing the aged person’s reluctance or refusal to enter the realm of the senior citizen”. (48)

In *Narratology: an Introduction*, Wolf Schmid underscores that the narrator in the diegetic world approaches the addressee to try to win his/her approval or to incite an impression, through a strategy of appeal. The narrator also anticipates the addressee’s response, whether positive or passive, and alters his story accordingly (78-84).



Figure (7) Sample of kinetic ritual iteration in Kawthar Younis, *A Present from the Past*, 2016.

Schmid adds that in quasi autobiographical narrative, the narrator often experiences a split between his narrating self and the narrated self with whom he any longer identifies. He therefore describes his old or earlier self as “a complete stranger” (77). These two points are pertinent to evaluating the performance of parents as secondary narrators in *Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant* and “A Present from the Past”. In these occasions, the daughters, and documentary makers, perform the role of recipients or addressees, whose response to the narrative develops a new cycle of narration

of the same episode. The stories told by the parents and retold by the daughters generate a pliable medium of narration.

In Chapter (16) titled “Bedtime Stories” Chast graphically records the stories told by her mother as her mental powers “melt” down. These are narrative memories, a classification introduced by memory theoreticians, which stand as the most fictive accounts in the memoir. The mother creatively fills the blind spots of her fading memory with fictitious details that exhibit her perception of figures from the past, blended with her suppressed wishes, prejudices and fears. The episode in general questions the validity of

conceptual framework to account for rudimentary experience: how can systematic representation classify and evaluate the need for, and the performance of these narrative processes? Chast emphasizes that the mother's narratives are "bedtimes" stories. The title is ambiguous, however, since the reference to "bed" could entail not only childhood associations, but also a literal old age experience. Whatever the case, the mother assumes the role of the assertive narrator who orients the audience and negotiates their response. The role of logic recedes before the flow of impressions and perceptions colored by subjective preferences that are in full reign.

The narrative flow continues as the daughter transforms her mother's oral narration into visual panels, and the graphic element contributes to enrich the interpretive potential of both the daughter and the reader. Chast reacts to her mother's stories, adding titles, providing comments, and evaluating their authenticity. She even retells parts of the stories based on her own memories. This intervention could qualify her as a coauthor, participating, and not only delivering, the narrative, but it also reveals the potential of narration as an experiential space.

In Younis the father stands as a secondary narrator when compared to the framing story recorded by the daughter and film maker. The viewer watches several scenes containing dramatic monologues that convey the role of the father as focalizer. The recollection of memories of his beloved is impressive, but selective. At intervals, the father recounts details of his relationship with Patricia, with a constant endeavor to orienting the daughter, and addressee, towards the

emotional aspect of the story, always reiterating that she loved him dearly, but seldom admitting that the emotion was mutual. Younis also acts as a positive recipient whose impression is sought by a father who anticipates her reactions, and thus gives several versions of the same story. Younis' "A Present from the Past" embodies the conflict within the father as he experiences a split between him and his older self. He repeatedly tells his daughter that he does not want to restore his affections to Patricia, but he does want to see her as reminiscent of his old days. He expects that the person whom he would meet would also be radically different from the girl he once loved, changes that he finds inevitable. The sense of the disjunction between his two selves is also expressed through the mother who stands in this case as a tertiary narrator. The mother agrees to the journey not as an act of restoration but as a measure of emancipation. This means that the story is presented according to three perspectives.

As intergenerational narratives of old age, Chast's and Younis's multimodal accounts reveal aging from the perspectives of parents and daughters. The parents' perception, whether regenerative or degenerative, stems from embodied, non -conceptual levels of consciousness, and as such focuses on how bodies interact with the environment, how the senses conceive the world, and how emotions shape and direct human responses. Alternatively, the daughters' approach abides by socially defined understanding of aging, wrapped in complicated language codes. As documentary comics and film the narratives invest the potentials offered by medium specific tools to express common perceptions and sensation related to aging that transcend cultural difference.



As documentary makers, both Chast and Younis explore the world of their parents, its patterns and norms, with the intention of regulating them within the lines of socially accepted lines of conduct. Their involvement in the diegetic world exceeds therefore their role as narrators, and extends to acting as witnesses and performers. Their narrative evaluates and interprets the parents' reactions, and objections, to that vision imposed on their lives. While Chast endeavors to convince her parents to acknowledge and accept the degeneration associated with age, Younis tries to transform her father momentarily to more regenerative aspects. In narrating the parents' responses, Chast and Younis resort to patterns of expression that are non-verbal: The image, sound, color, movement and voice all participate in conveying the parents' temporal and spatial perceptions, while written texts and dialogue relate the daughters' conceptual representation. While Younis's involvement in the narrative is more gradual and calculated, Chast is wholeheartedly engaged up to the minutest details. Younis limits her narrative to a record of the behavioral image of her father's, recording the father's actions and reactions while his inner thoughts remain ambivalent. Conversely, Chast delves deeper into details of her parents' moods, offering glimpses, however partial, of their specific inclinations. As focalizers, both artists are consciously directing the readers,

and recipients, towards greater involvement with the narrative, through iteration and ritualistic frequency of several points of attention. The parents, on their parts, perform as secondary narrators of portions of their memories of past experiences, consciously employing strategies of appeal and orientation. The most significant contribution remains to be that, as narratives of aging, both works provide possibilities to locate this experience neither in the actual world, nor in the mind, but rather in story worlds that they share with recipients in an experiential formula, not accommodated for within the schemas offered by gerontologists and theoreticians. In fact, as experiential narratives the texts could effectively account for a rather complicated chain of layers, or levels, of intergenerational issues. On one level the narrator is the aging protagonist while the recipient is the documentary/comics (in this case the daughter), who's interaction or involvement in the narrative takes the multimodal feature of a performative witness. On another level this same witness becomes the narrator in his/her turn while the reader or viewer is engaged, through experiential, medium specific devices that reveal embodiment and evaluation. Finally, as instances of narrative gerontology, both works offer new perspectives and effective multimodal techniques in depicting the aging experience.

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