**Chapter 10**

**‘To Create Her World Anew’: Charlotte Salomon’s Graphic Life Narrative**

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**Abstract**

This chapter discusses Charlotte Salomon’s *Life? or Theatre?,* a sequence of 784 paintings created between 1940 and 1942 by a young German-Jewish artist. Focusing upon three key paintings within the cycle, and in particular their representations of open windows, this chapter argues that *Life? or Theatre?* is a complex, kaleidoscopic rendering of multiple graphic life stories, which can be opened up and better understood through the vocabulary of comics criticism. By focusing on the spaces between pages—the gutter—this chapter exposes how these are vital, generative gaps charged with meaning. In so doing it challenges reductive, biographical readings of Salomon’s life and work, insisting that *Life? or Theatre?* is a visual and textual representation of many life narratives, taking on the shapeshifting form of an epic, reiterative cycle.

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Between 1940 and 1942 Charlotte Salomon, a young German-Jewish artist, created and assembled a sequence of 784 paintings, undertaking this colossal project while hiding in the South of France. Although she painted over a thousand pages during this period of intense creativity, she selected and numbered 769 and, along with 15 pages of painted text, united them under a single title: *Leben? oder Theater?* (*Life? or Theatre?*). The individual pages of *Life? or Theatre?* are small, only several centimetres larger than a standard A4 page, and are painted in gouache, a fast-drying paint that Salomon spread thickly to achieve vivid colours with exceptional speed. The artwork opens with a title page naming the work and bearing the subtitle ‘ein singespiel’ (M004155-A), in an apparent reference to a singspiel, or ‘songplay’, a form of German opera that peaked in popularity during the eighteenth century.[[1]](#footnote-1) Salomon’s act of naming therefore does little to clarify what *Life? or Theatre?* actually *is.* The opening pages reveal that the work consists ‘of a Prelude, a Main section and an Epilogue’ (M004155-B), while a subsequent cast list of named players, painted in a space between two opening curtains, is suggestive of an impending performance. Finally, an additional painted line of text at the bottom of this playbill states that ‘the action takes place during the years 1913 to 1940 in Germany, later in Nice, France’ (M004155-C).

If this paratextual apparatus places *Life? or Theatre?* in a historical timeframe preceding Salomon’s birth, the main body of the work nevertheless depicts refracted versions of the artist’s own life narrative through its central character, Charlotte Kann. (Throughout this chapter I will refer to this character as Charlotte, as distinct from the artist, Salomon).[[2]](#footnote-2) These first pages demonstrate that this is neither visual autobiography nor an illustrated diary, but an elaborately constructed, multi-modal artwork that defies formal categorisation. Importantly, *Life? or Theatre?* is cyclical in shape, concluding with its own origins: the final pages of painted text state that the artist, after briefly considering self-destruction, instead decides to ‘undertake something wildly eccentric’ (M004922), beginning a project that will ‘create her world anew out of the depths’ (M004924)—a project that is, these images suggest, *Life? or Theatre?* itself. Salomon’s last numbered painting shows a woman, her back to the viewer who holds a paintbrush across a page, poised to begin the recently concluded work. In this *mise-en-abyme*, readers are transported back to the rising curtain of the opening pages. With this initial sequence of paintings, which is both the beginning and end, the stage is set for one of the twentieth century’s most remarkable, and elusive, artworks.

*Life? or Theatre?* is not, then, a play. If it is a performance, it is staged across paintings that frequently feature written text painted in brushstrokes or handwritten in pencil. The 211 paintings within the Prelude are attached to semi-transparent overlays that contain writing, thus combining text and image through multiple overlaid surfaces. In a further complication, these paintings often specify a piece of music to accompany a particular scene. The images, when overlaid or conjoined with text, become palimpsests*,* as layers of word, song and image accumulate upon each page. Readers must also engage with the work simultaneously as viewers and listeners. While these overlays do not accompany every painting—the Main Section and Epilogue frequently feature text on the page itself—I contend that the interactive relationship between image and text is crucial to understanding *Life? or Theatre?.* Comics criticism, which has long explored how ‘layers of words and images […] entwine but never synthesize upon the page’ (Chute, 2011: 5), offers a useful vocabulary with which to explore the relationship between image and text across several of Salomon’s paintings, while also acknowledging their position within a wider, cyclical sequence. Although many individual paintings, especially in the Prologue, are divided into grids and panels, comics theory also allows me to discuss their important sequential arrangements. For Salomon, as for many contemporary comics artists, ‘sequential art is the act of weaving a fabric’ (Eisner, 1985: 127), as she threads together the different strands of multiple life stories into a complex visual narrative. Viewing *Life? or Theatre?* through the lens of comics scholarship reveals how thisis not a narrative accompanied by attendant illustrations, but a dynamic process of exchange between text and image, which coalesce and coexist upon the same page. Moreover, while these individual paintings combine to create a graphic narrative of many lives, none of these life stories are straightforwardly Salomon’s own, no more than *Life? or Theatre* is itself categorically a comic. Wary of Griselda Pollock’s warning that it is easier to focus on who Charlotte Salomon was, rather than what *Life? or Theatre?* is, this chapter’s exploration of whether these paintings constitute a graphic life narrative does not attempt to identify a coherent, stable or truthful vision of Salomon’s own life (Pollock, 2018: 191). Instead, I suggest that Salomon’s work is a kaleidoscopic rendering of multiple graphic life stories, which can be opened up and better understood through comics criticism.

Responding to its hybrid, multi-modal form, this chapter will focus upon three paintings from *Life? or Theatre?* to address the relationship between the artwork’s textual and visual elements. Yet I also examine the crucial spaces within and between each painting. Reading these pages as comics, a form that is ‘segmented into frames and marked gutters’ and provokes consideration of ‘what has happened between frames’ (Smith and Watson, 2010: 173), places a revealing emphasis on the charged absences within *Life? or Theatre?*. As Scott McCloud has influentially explained, what happens between frames is a defining feature of comics, and although their ‘panels fracture both time and space, offering a staccato rhythm of unconnected moments’, what is known as ‘closure allows us to connect these moments’ (1994: 67). McCloud describes closure as a process of reading whereby the reader connects the individual panels, offering an important precedent for my reading of the gaps in and between Salomon’s paintings as vital, generative spaces. The description of the blank space between frames as ‘the gutter’ in comics criticism denotes, according to Hillary Chute, the ways in which ‘readers project causality from frame to frame’, creating an art form which is both static and animate (Chute, 2016: 16). Reading comics is a participatory process, one that assembles a narrative not only from images and words but also through the absences between panels and pages. Moreover, the process of page turning, as Sarah McConnell argues, holds the potential to ‘reveal something unknown to the audience’ (McConnell, 2019: 145), introducing a level of uncertainty into the processes of closure described by McCloud and Chute.[[3]](#footnote-3) Many contemporary graphic narratives (some of which are discussed elsewhere in this book) witness histories and memories of trauma through an interplay of presence and absence, and much recent scholarship has highlighted the complex resonances between comics and trauma.[[4]](#footnote-4) Building on this work, this chapter explores how *Life? or Theatre?* elicits meaning not only through inscriptions upon the page but also via gaps and silences.

I am, by no means, the first to suggest that Salomon’s paintings are comparable to contemporary graphic narratives: Pollock states that Salomon’s detailed vignettes, which occasionally jostle for space on a single page, share ‘something in common with comic books’ (2018: 222); Deborah Schultz and Edward Timms note that this pictorial narrative is ‘indebted to the comic strip’ (2009: 42); and Astrid Schmetterling asserts that Salomon’s stylistic devices clearly ‘borrowed from the language of popular cartoon strips’ (1998: 54). These brief comparisons are expanded upon by Ariela Freedman, who positions Salomon as a lost figure in the history of female Jewish comics artists, arguing that her paintings offer ‘a valuable precedent for […] graphic memoir and testimonial’ (2014: 41). While I too note the obvious comparisons between Salomon’s artwork and the multi-modality of comics, here I demonstrate that comics criticism offers a productive vocabulary with which to discuss these paintings. I am less concerned as to whether they can or should themselves be classified as comics. While Carolyn Austin correctly emphasizes how ‘Salomon's work differs radically from comic aesthetics’ because it ‘is not meant for mass production’ (2008: 104), I draw an important distinction between, on the one hand, the argument that *Life? or Theatre? is* a comic and, on the other, the suggestion that the commingling of image and text in this unusual artwork can be discussed *as* a comic. Indeed, Austin’s own readings of Salomon highlight how these paintings might benefit from further analysis *with* critical understandings of graphic narratives, while not being *categorically identified* as such. I therefore use the notion of the gutter, in particular, to demonstrate how *Life? Or Theatre?* defies conventional forms of narrative representation and instead demands a creative, flexible critical response from viewers.

**Framed Windows, Other Worlds**

The Prelude to *Life? or Theatre?* contains a short, dramatic sequence of three paintings accompanied by transparent overlays filled with text, representing the events leading up to the suicide of Franziska Kann (née Knarre), mother of Charlotte. These are situated within the wider narratives of the Knarre and Kann families, with Salomon documenting a traumatic maternal history of suicide: Mrs Knarre and both her daughters will, by the end of *Life? or Theatre?,* end their own lives. Franziska, and much later her mother, kill themselves by leaping from the open window of an apartment. Their deaths are therefore unsurprisingly and irrevocably linked to the recurring visual motif of the window, a space painted many times over in *Life? or Theatre?.* These painted frames act as a symbolic threshold between life and death, one the viewer is only partially able to navigate; when these desperate female subjects end their own lives, Salomon’s paintings do not always follow their journey beyond the windowpane. The proliferation of open windows throughout *Life? or Theatre?* therefore functions as both a key image within the work and a void at its centre. The windows highlight how, even within such a vast and expansive artwork, there are limits to representation. Charlotte herself must decide, while perched next to an open window, whether she will follow her mother and grandmother into a space beyond the page, or stay *within* the painting and become a creator herself. Others have noted the importance of the window as a visual motif in *Life? or Theatre?* (Austin, 2008; Buerkle 2013; Pollock 2018). For Darcy Buerkle, these windows are ‘the means by which women die or think about dying’, while also functioning as ‘the space by which survivors wait’ (2013: 62). Yet the process of Franziska’s fatal leap takes place not only within the paintings themselves but also in the spaces between them; that is, in the gutter. These ominous windows both inscribe the absence of death as a presence upon the page and act as a crucial contact zone for public and private histories, connecting the often claustrophobic domestic interiors of the family home with the violence of the street beyond.

*Life? or Theatre?* depicts the family narratives of the Knarres and Kanns as entangled within a wider history of Jewish persecution. The Prologue shows Mr and Mrs Kann’s married domestic life in a richly furnished apartment across multi-panelled pages while interspersing these with several full splash pages of crowds who march under the red and black banner of the swastika. In considering the importance of the window as a motif, close attention should therefore be paid to exactly what kind of world these open shutters reveal and conceal. Although the Prologue contains numerous depictions of Franziska staring out of empty windows onto a clear blue sky (M004169), we are reminded by such disturbing crowd scenes that the events depicted inside the family apartment are always subject to the rising violence on the street below. Later, in a full-page painting within the Main Section (M004762), swastikas—which are painted backwards throughout *Life? or Theatre?* in a reversal that deprives the symbol of ‘its fascist sting’ (Pollock 2018: 99)—now adorn every window of a towering building. Crowds loot and smash their way through shopfronts below. On the left, riotous figures dance and cavort in jubilation at the violence, and Salomon’s deft use of colour suggests a lit bonfire in their midst. The text in the top left-hand corner, painted directly onto the page and positioned graffiti-like on the side of a building, reads: ‘Perish Jews! Grab what you can!’ (M004762). Meanwhile, three bowed figures trudge in the foreground, isolated individuals among a surge of bodies, the guns of Nazi officers pointed toward their bent backs. Such scenes situate the private, domestic interiors of *Life? or Theatre?* within the terrors of a violent history. Describing Salomon’s paintings as ‘an abyss which is as intensely personal as it is historical’, Jacqueline Rose highlights how these imagesplunge the viewer into intricately connected public and private spheres (2014: 8). I contend that the threshold of the window ledge exposes, throughout *Life? or Theatre?,* fatal connections between the privacy of domestic life and the dangerous public space of the street outside.

The suicide of Charlotte’s mother, Franziska, and, much later in the cycle, that of her grandmother, represent two key moments which both occur within, yet also move beyond, the confines of familial domestic life. Both women, whose struggles with depression are documented throughout Salomon’s paintings, end their lives by jumping from an apartment onto the street below. Their desperate deaths create a cycle of violence in which Charlotte also becomes implicated. After her grandmother’s death, in a scene painted in swift brushstrokes of fiery colours, she sits beside an open window and pleads: ‘it’s starting with me too, dear God, please don’t let me go mad’ (M004907). The women’s falling bodies echo across *Life? or Theatre?* and, as their fatal leaps are repeatedly framed by the outline of a windowpane, Salomon’s paintings suggest the ledge is a gutter that separates the living from the dead. In *Disaster Drawn* (2016)*,* Chute argues that ‘comics, with its frames and gutters, is always about boundaries—inside, outside; containable, uncontainable; figurable, unfigurable; constituted, deconstituted’ (Chute 2016, 193). Through these falling bodies, and the repeated inscription of the window frame as a symbolic and literal boundary line, Salomon explores the limits of representation within her dynamic memory project, taking her viewer from inside to outside and, as I explore later in this chapter, from the terrestrial to the celestial. In particular, the three paintings depicting Franziska’s death (M004179-81), contained within the Prelude of *Life? or Theatre?,* demonstrate how Salomon’s frames, panels, and gutters allow her to represent this journey out of the window, over the frame, and off the page.

Scene two of the Prelude begins with dark, painted pages within which multiple panels depict Franziska’s intense depression and her family’s mounting concern. An overlay informs us that ‘quite inexplicably, Franziska suddenly ceases to find pleasure in anything’ (M004176), while the painting beneath is divided into panels depicting her attempts to continue with daily life. In the top right-hand corner, a single panel ominously shows her staring out of an open window. Two pages later she attempts to swallow poison and is subsequently ‘kept under the strict observation of a nurse’ (M004178). Yet this observation (see Fig. 10.1) is not strict enough: as the narrator’s speech notes, the nurse ‘confuses hope for the future with the reality of the present, and for one moment—which is utilized by Franziska to throw herself out the window—leaves the room’ (M004179). Within the text of the overlay, therefore, Franziska commits suicide in parentheses, using the break in the sentence—signified by dashes, and manifesting visually in the painting as a momentary lapse in the nurse’s attention—to make her exit out of the window. There are two conflicting narratives taking place within the overlay: although the narrator reports that the nurse sees a certain ‘hope for the future’ in her patient, Franziska herself wails ‘I cannot bear it any longer, I am always so alone’ (M004179). Importantly, while the narrator’s words are sketched in pencilled paragraphs upon the overlay, Franziska’s final, desperate utterance is painted in capitalized red letters, in a curving line that bends around the outline of her reclining body in the middle of the page. When the overlay is placed over the painting beneath, Franziska’s last words become inscribed upon her body, while the speech of the narrator is accompanied with sketched arrows that direct the reader’s gaze from left to right across the page and, eventually, through the open window.

**Insert Fig. 10.1:** ‘The nurse shares this opinion. However, she confuses hope for the future with the reality of the present, and for one moment — which is utilized by Franziska to throw herself out of the window — leaves the room. Franziska: “I cannot bear it any longer, I'm always so alone”’ (M004179). Collection Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, © Charlotte Salomon Foundation, Charlotte Salomon ®

At the very top of this painting, the nurse’s feet disappear through the doorframe. The ‘strict observation’ described in the text on the overlay is consequently not that of the nurse, but rather the reader.We alone ‘hear’ Franziska’s cry, which is fatally ignored by the painted figures upon the page. We bear witness as she rises from her bed and approaches the ominous window. Moving down through the panels of the page, reading from left to right, Franziska begins to emerge from her bed. In the centre of the painting, the frame of the window itself looms forward, with Franziska located on the inside. The image asks us to view this scene from multiple perspectives; although we initially watch her movements from inside the room, we are simultaneously repositioned outside of the building, looking in, as she approaches the closed glass in the middle panel. By the time we reach the culmination of the page’s sequence—Franziska’s jump—we occupy a liminal viewing point which is both inside and outside, hovering above the window sill itself. Meanwhile, at the bottom of the page, Franziska’s feet disappear into the darkness beyond as, in an act of doubling, the entire page becomes encased in a physical window frame. The complicated perspective within this single page-as-frame, and the staged sequence of Franziska’s final moments, are thus achieved through a multi-directional exchange between both image and text, and presence and absence.

Readers must therefore intuit what takes place in the gaps between these images: in the unpainted moments, we might imagine Franziska opening the window, stepping onto the ledge and jumping off. We become co-conspirators in this appalling sequence, realizing simultaneously that as the nurse’s feet exit the room via a door in the top right of the panel, Franziska’s feet also depart via a window frame in the bottom left. Following the overlay’s arrows as they move downward across the page, readers themselves reactivate the connections between this sequence of events. Thierry Groensteen’s contention that the arrangements and structure of the comics page demand ‘to be traversed, crossed, glanced at, and analytically deciphered’ (Groensteen, 2007: 19) is helpful here. For as we fill in the spaces between Salomon’s images, we ourselves complete the process of Franziska’s fall, which does not itself appear in the painting. We must journey through this sequence, deciphering its meaning by examining Salomon’s verbal and visual components, which crucially cannot be seen at the same time—after all, Salomon’s original overlay demands that we move back and forth between the two. This painting, which highlights the limitations of representation is, through the written overlay, encased within a symbolic frame and gutter. The framed window ledges, which lead us to the gutters between paintings, mark the boundaries between the private and the public; the safe and the violent; the personal and the historic in *Life? or Theatre?*. The layers of images and text demand that readers and viewers constantly negotiate and renegotiate the perilous borders between these conditions. Salomon’s sequences, even as they generate visual narratives, continually emphasize the limits of representation. Although Salomon frames Franziska’s movements, she also refuses to depict her death. When Franziska leaps from the window she jumps off the edge of the page itself.

**Insert Fig. 10.2:** 'Mr. and Mrs. Knarre were on the point of sitting down to supper. Unaccountably, Mrs. Knarre feels uneasy and hurries to her daughter's room. Outside the door, she meets the nurse, whom she reproaches. Then she enters the room. One glance at the open window, and she knows what has happened and hurries down the stairs. Mr. Knarre has followed his wife. Albert receives the terrible news over the telephone, and Charlotte knows nothing yet’ (M004180).

Collection Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, © Charlotte Salomon Foundation, Charlotte Salomon ®

The next painting in the sequence (see Fig. 10.2) continues this narrative from a vertical perspective that surveys multiple rooms within the apartment from above. The result is a cross-sectional view that resembles the miniature interior of a doll’s house. The overlay for this image describes the action: Mrs Knarre, while eating supper with Mr Knarre, ‘feels uneasy’ and rushes to her daughter’s room, only to discover the open window. Franziska’s husband, Albert, ‘receives the terrible news by telephone’, while Charlotte, who sits alone in bed, knows nothing of the unfolding tragedy. This compartmentalisation of the page, which conflates the architecture of the apartment with the formal architecture of the comics grid, relies on spatial representation to reveal the moments before and after Franziska’s suicide. Salomon’s use of multiple panels within this painting allows her to reveal a simultaneity of time and space within a single page. We see this series of events from the outside and with none of the intimate detail of the previous painting. Meanwhile, in the centre of the page, a dark rectangle of midnight blue, indicating an open window, suggests Franziska’s absence.

The spatial grammar of comics has been compared by numerous critics to ‘the cross sections and facades of multi-story buildings’ (Labio, 2015: 329) with the architecture of grids, gutters and panels described by Dominic Davies as indicative of what he terms ‘comics’ “infrastructural form”’ (2019: 4). As I have begun to suggest, the characters in this painting are separated from one another by discreet boundaries similar to the panels of comics. And indeed, the commentary on the overlay is also divided into numbered sections that further highlight the chronology of these distinct, divided sections. Within the painting, these panels are built from the architecture of the apartment with door frames, staircases and floorboards creating an order suggestive of how a reader would progress down the page. The words upon the overlay also follow these horizontal panels, as the numbered narrative encourages us to read down from left to right, and to view the page through a roughly grid-like pattern. Here the apartment operates as a form of narrative, with its panels and grid layout suggesting not only infrastructure but also pushing events forward in time. The domestic architecture depicted here, the multiple frames of beds, doorways, windows and tables, combined with the jutting angles of a staircase and floorboards, do not just recreate the spatial layout of the apartment. They operate as an intrinsic element of Salomon’s graphic narrative, forming a dynamic background capable of tracking different characters’ movements in time and space. Importantly, the open window in the centre of the page signals a rupture in this narrative sequence, becoming an alternative site into which Franziska has disappeared.

Moreover, although the style of this painting differs from its immediate predecessor, there are also marked similarities between the two. Just as Franziska’s disappearing foot in the previous painting shows her exiting the narrative by a window ledge, here a staircase offers a literal route off the page. As characters walk, or jump, from the confines of Salomon’s domestic scene, the formal infrastructure of the apartment, as shown in Fig. 10.2., is partially defined through its limits. Importantly, through these domestic infrastructures, Salomon creates a physical and imagined geography for our eyes to navigate, plotting a route through her sequential narrative. Here time is condensed, as we watch figures walk through corridors, enter into rooms, peer through windows, and even succumb to the despair of grief within the confines of a single painting. As spectators, once again, we participate within a sequence of graphic events that lead to Franziska's death, viewing the cross-section of intersecting occurrences that must lead to a single, deadly conclusion. The crucial role of Salomon’s sequential images, and the charged empty spaces between them suggest how the form, as much as the content, of *Life? or Theatre?* indicates the violence of its characters’ lives and deaths.

Moving forward to the next page reveals an additional, shocking juxtaposition (see Fig.10.3). The delicate architectural details and movements of multiple darting figures are erased in the movement from one painting to the next. Readers are confronted by a splash page showing Franziska’s body lying disjointed on the pavement, her contorted limbs dominating the canvas. This broken body stalls the narrative, its violence emphasized by its sharp contrast with the darting people depicted in the two preceding pages. Gone are the multiple, almost identical figures who walk and run along panels, and the sudden shift in the pace of Salomon’s visual narrative only heightens the impact of Franziska’s violent death. This is further accentuated through the force of her fall, registered through the significant size of the splash page and the awkward angles of her twisted limbs. Despite the implied movement all around her, perhaps indicating the speed with which she landed upon the ground, Franziska is perfectly still. In this sequence of three paintings, she has transformed from a series of multiple moving figures to a static singular body, whose inverted leg, with the ankle twisted inwards, implies fatal damage. A vivid scarlet seeps from beneath her folded arm, while her covered head creates a horrifying focal point for this single image; as viewers, we have travelled through the domestic interiors and open windows of the two previous paintings and down onto the pavement outside. In so doing we are taken not upwards to the celestial, dark blue sky depicted in the earlier window panes, but are instead dragged down into the violent terrestrial space of the street below.

**Insert Fig. 10.3:** ‘Franziska died immediately, the apartment being on the third floor. There is nothing more to be done about the tragedy’ (M004181). Collection Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, © Charlotte Salomon Foundation, Charlotte Salomon ®

The transparent overlays that accompany these three paintings frequently feature curving italic script written in pencil. Yet the overlay of this climactic scene features painted letters that wind up along the curves of Franziska’s broken body, from her extended wrist, along her head, neck and torso, to finish at her ankle. The lyrics also written upon the overlay—‘we twine for thee the maiden’s wreath with violet-coloured ribbon’—reference an earlier musical refrain played during Albert and Franziska’s wedding. The tune continues after Franziska’s death as the mourning family arrange her funeral and erect a gravestone. It accompanies each stage of Franziska’s transition from marriage to grave, and from life to death. Pollock interprets the outline of the words upon the overlay as touching, ‘almost caressing the dead body, literally twining its funeral wreath’ (2018: 240). But they also respond to the other two paintings from this sequence, in which Franziska’s final words are written across her body, with Salomon’s combination of visual and textual elements creating a felt intimacy upon the page.

The representational framework of the previous paintings, where pages are divided into multiple frames, is temporarily halted by the monstrous aftermath of this fall, which is both explicit and doubly graphic. Franziska’s voice is silenced, with the overlay detailing how her death was immediate: ‘there is nothing more to be done about the tragedy’ (M004181). Once again, it is not only the subject matter but also the *form* of Salomon’s graphic narrative that creates the horror of this sequence. For although the pages of *Life? or Theatre?* are physically the same size, the contrast between the size of the frames contributes to the shocking qualities of these three paintings. As Groensteen notes, ‘in a [comic] book in which all the other pages are regular, a page that is suddenly distinguished by a special configuration carries an extremely strong impact’ (2007: 97). While *Life? or Theatre?* is not bound as a book (comic or otherwise), this sequence undoubtedly elicits a particular kind of participatory reading experience, as we trace a fatal journey from internal domestic spaces to the dangerous urban environment outside, where broken bodies lie upon the pavement and Nazi supporters cavort amidst bonfires. Although Salomon’s paintings disavow any strictly linear narrative as such, the process of reading or viewing these three pages highlights the importance of sequentiality in *Life? or Theatre?.* The finality of Franziska’s death is emphasized by the frenetic activity of life in the preceding paintings. The juxtaposition of movement and sudden stillness elicits the viewers’ participation, as we turn between the image and text, painting and overlay, or move between paintings themselves. Understanding *Life? or Theatre?* as a graphic narrative foregrounds the extent to which the gutters both within and between paintings—and even the process of turning between page and overlay—function as a site of narrative momentum. The artwork demands that we examine not only the actual pages and overlays, but also mind the gaps that both separate and weave together individual paintings into a dynamic visual narrative.

The traumatic personal histories retold across the numerous narratives of *Life? or Theatre?* belong to a wider history of Jewish suicide during the Weimar Republic. As Salomon’s biographer Mary Lowenthal Felstiner notes, in Berlin, ‘from 1925 to 1927, a capital of 4,000,000 people lost 5,053 to suicide, with Franze Salomon just one of them. Suicide lodged in the city’s nicest quarters, among intellectuals and professionals more than anyone else’ (1994: 14). As Felstiner continues, statistically, middle-class Jewish women were more likely than any other demographic to end their own lives, leading her to the dramatic conclusion that Franziska’s suicide ‘was not anomalous, it was *exemplary*’ (14). Buerkle’s extensive study of Salomon and suicide builds a further interpretative framework into these statistics, noting that Salomon suggests a hidden history of women’s self-destruction that existed ‘outside the margins of general narratives of the period’ (2013: 15). Using techniques which anticipate later graphic narratives, Salomon‘s paintings reveal these obscured, traumatic histories, while remaining formally self-conscious of their limitations within her artistic representation. *Life? or Theatre?* consistently reminds us that its protagonist, Charlotte (like her creator) is potentially the inheritor of these suicidal tendencies. Throughout the artwork, she too must navigate the threshold of the open window, and at the heart of this graphic narrative is a choice, of whether to ‘commit suicide or to undertake something wildly eccentric’ (M004922). Charlotte is thus faced with the question that Salomon has already decided to answer. It is at this charged intersection between protagonist and painter that two potential routes are revealed: one follows a maternal line across the ledge of these open windows, the other attempts a daring, multi-modal reconstruction of many lives.

**Conclusion**

The image of the open window—evocatively depicted in the three paintings discussed here—recurs throughout the vast cycle of *Life? or Theatre?.* As young Charlotte leans upon a window ledge immediately after her mother’s death, she plaintively asks ‘why doesn’t she come, my mummy, she promised’ (M004188). Her hopes that Franziska might appear on the other side of the glass, or could leave an angelic trace for her upon the windowsill, are bitterly disappointed. Later Paulinka, Charlotte’s stepmother, begins to fear that her young stepdaughter ‘might also throw herself out of the window’ (M004245). These fears, in turn, prompt Charlotte’s grandmother to recite her own life narrative towards the end of the Prologue, recounting how her own mother’s frantic, suicidal attempts escalated ‘until one day she collapsed and died under the window’ (M004261). She then remembers how, three decades later, it was Franziska’s turn to ‘stand and stand at the window—yearning and dreaming’ (M004289), in a sequence of three full-page spreads. The grandmother’s visual sequence culminates with the image of an open window in an empty room (M004291), which appears as a vast absence in the aftermath of death. At the end of her recitation, Charlotte’s grandmother sits, bent double in her sadness, with one arm resting upon the window ledge (M004300), foretelling her own decision, over four hundred paintings later, to undertake a fatal jump (M004899). Eventually, Charlotte too will consider suicide via this maternal route as she sits beside an open window (M004906), the blanket at her feet taking on the unmistakable form of her mother’s dead body, as graphically depicted in the Prologue.

These open windows are interconnected in the web of Salomon’s visual narratives. They remain an ominous presenceas viewers hurtle backwards and forwards in time across the complex strands of this traumatic family history. The multidirectional reading these windows elicit leads me to a final stipulation: these open frames can be understood as a form of braiding, Groensteen’s term suggesting that there are potential relationships between every panel of a comic and, therefore, that they ‘constitute a network and even a system’ (2007: 158). Reading *Life? or Theatre?* as a form of graphic narrative therefore not only highlights the importance of the chronological sequence, and the gutters in and between each painting, but also foregrounds how key images, including the window, are braided throughout the narrative. Tracing the sequential and non-linear connections between these open windows highlights the networked quality of Salomon’s paintings, which all relate to each other through a multitude of possible connections. Charlotte’s decision of whether to make her own fatal jump must be viewed, in this context, as entangled with every open window that appears throughout the vast narrative cycle, and vice versa.

Therefore, although these open frames undoubtedly connect to the difficult events of Salomon’s own short life, they also illuminate the remarkable complexity of her work. They are linked to both the terrestrial world of ever-increasing violence on the streets *and* a celestial realm beyond the limits of representation. The glass windows in *Life? Or Theatre?* are both transparent and opaque: they are panes through which characters look, but which may also reflect their own image back at them. Windows become the means for exploring interior and exterior realms, connecting and separating in equal measure. While they often appear in Salomon’s paintings as empty spaces, they are nevertheless charged with enormous literal and significant symbolic meaning. If the form of *Life? or Theatre?* makes it impossible to define and difficult to describe, my aim here is not to claim that it is categorically an autobiography, graphic life narrative, or comic.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is a remarkable visual and textual representation of several life stories, interwoven with music, fantasy and myth. In adopting the shapeshifting form of an epic, reiterative cycle, it ends with its own conception. In 784 paintings it evokes a cast of characters who are fictionalized players from Salomon’s own life, but they are not a documentary portrait—the autobiographical truth of *Life? or Theatre?* should not be our primary concern. The insistent biographical interest in Salomon, as exemplified by the novels, films, plays and operas that focus upon her short life, demonstrates an imperative need for future discussions of her art and legacy that escape the confines of biography and return to the artwork itself, as I have tried to do here.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In all its complexities and contradictions, *Life? or Theatre* exemplifies and expands Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s warning that ‘the autobiographical is not a transparent practice’ (2002: 8). Like these windows, the autobiographical as defined by Smith and Watson may reflect and reveal in equal measure. We must continue to search for innovative ways of seeing, hearing and reading Salomon’s epic project, and the critical vocabulary provided by comics studies offers an additional, though by no means conclusive, interpretative framework for doing so. What is certain is that these windows, which are both the focal point and the lacuna at the centre of Salomon’s work, will continue to refuse any transparent revelation. As a crucial image braided into Salomon’s graphic narrative, they are themselves a kind of gutter, dividing and connecting the narrative in equal measure and providing a space in which viewers create participatory forms of meaning. They suggest *Life? or Theatre?*’s resistance to purely biographical readings that interpret these paintings as a single life story. Instead, this cyclical, elusive artwork offers a visual constellation of interconnected, graphic lives that we must continue to revisit and reinterpret.

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1. Although several published versions of *Life? or Theatre?* exist in English translation, references here are to the complete digitized work, hosted on the Jewish Historical Museum’s website: https://charlotte.jck.nl/section. This online version includes Salomon’s accompanying transparent text sheets along with the unnumbered gouaches which were typically rejected in previous, printed editions. Exact paintings are referenced using the Jewish Historical Museum’s numeration. For a full, English translated printed edition see Salomon, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Early printed editions of *Life? Or Theatre?* discuss the work as if it were a diary, selectively removing Salomon’s references to both sex and violence, while naming ‘Charlotte’ as a sensitive, intuitive girl whose paintings showed her ‘opening her heart and pouring forth her images’ (Straus, 1963). The problematic legacy of this ideal, child-victim, who is deprived of artistic agency by the removal of her surname, is repeated by the numerous plays and operas focussing upon the tragic events of Salomon’s life, and particularly her murder in Auschwitz at the age of 26, rather than her exceptional skill as an artist. The enduring fascination with her biography, rather than her remarkable creations, finds its culmination in David Foenkinos’ recent novel, *Charlotte* (2014). Griselda Pollock rightly rejects such readings of Salomon’s work that, set on reducing her paintings to self-portraiture, ‘commit a classic gendered and gendering move to reduce the artist who is woman to an intimate first name’ (Pollock, 2006: 34). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These arguments respond to Perry Nodelman’s influential study *Words About Pictures* (1988)in which he argues that each page within a picturebook ‘is conceived as only part of a large whole that also includes text and other pictures’ (126). The result being that each single picture is both part of a broader narrative and a source of tension as the reader must turn the page in anticipation of the next image in the sequence. This creates, for Nodelman, a process of imbalance which only concludes with the book’s final page. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Recent scholarship on graphic life narratives has suggested that ‘the form of comics has a peculiar relation to expressing life stories’ (Chute, 2011: 2; see also El Refaie, 2012; Kunka, 2017; Whitlock, 2006). Numerous critics have outlined how modern graphic memoirs, exemplified by Art Spiegelman’s *The Complete Maus* (1996)or Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2006), ‘open up new and troubled spaces’ for self-representation (Whitlock, 2006: 976). These scholars contend that what Chute calls the ‘spatial syntax’ of comics demands new critical approaches capable of discussing graphic life narratives (Chute, 2016: 4). These ongoing conversations lay the important framework for a critical reading of *Life? or Theatre?* not as a ‘true’ representation of Salomon’s life (thus conflating the multi-modal forms of her work into a memoir or visual diary), but as a complex, experimental graphic narrative. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Although many critics have wrestled with the right terminology for discussing *Life? or Theatre?* most view Salomon’s paintings as an epic memory project. Pollock has repeatedly described it as a ‘theatre of memory’ (2006: 57), which explores a labyrinth of personal histories, while Mary Lowenthal Felstiner, in her biography of Salomon, describes it as ‘an autobiography without an I’ (1994: xi). In the single edited collection dedicated to Salomon’s work, her paintings are viewed as a means of understanding ‘history as narrative and history as trauma’ (Steinberg, 2006: 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. These include, but are not confined to, David Foenkinos’ recent novel, *Charlotte* (2014), Marc-André Dalbavie’s opera *Charlotte Salomon* (2014), and a forthcoming animated biopic of Salomon scheduled to be directed by Bilbo Bergeron. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)