

The Christ under Reconstruction

From the Face to the Celestial Machine

PETRA CARLSSON

Petra Carlsson is senior lecturer in systematic theology at the Stockholm School of Theology.

petra.carlsson@ehs.se

“Everyone knows Jesus: he is the most painted figure in all of world art, identifiable everywhere,” states Joan Taylor in her introduction to the history of Jesus’ imagery.¹ The image of Jesus Christ, remaining basically the same from the sixth century onwards, is known from innumerable portraits of an always recognizable face. In this image, the features are notably important and thus universally the same; the almond shaped eyes, the high cheekbones, the slim face. Symbols and attributes are hardly needed to indicate his identity, even in the early portraits from the sixth century one immediately sees who it is.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari draw on this historical fact when suggesting a philosophical consequence of the notion of the face. The face of Christ, they argue, is the face with which we compare all other faces. Moreover, they hold, the Christ image – which has become the face of faces – embodies goodness, whiteness and maleness, inseparably; hence, it is the face of the White Man himself.² In other words, to Deleuze and Guattari, the face of Christ is the very basis for the universalization of white maleness. Not only does it instigate this particular ideal, however, but it even serves as a ground for the notion of the human ideal a such. The face grounds the very

1. Joan E. Taylor, *What Did Jesus Look Like?*, London 2018, 1.

2. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London 1999, 177.

idea of a correlate and its deviation. A face is limiting and excluding, they explain, by always instigating an either-or, this-or-that; man or woman, rich or poor, black or white: “Aha, it’s not a man and it’s not a woman, so it must be a transvestite!”³ The either-or, in turn, easily falls into judgment. The face grounds identity and begets a *yes* or *no*, thus, in other words, it forms a ground on which to judge. The binary relation may just as easily mark a tolerance as indicate an enemy to be mowed down at all costs, they hold.

In contrast to the notion of the face, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the notion of *the machine*. A machine, as opposed to a face, does not indicate a singular identity, but points instead to a former multiplicity. The face indicates the one whereas the machine indicates the many pieces brought together in its construction. If the face indicates an origin, a birth, as well as an end, the machine, instead, indicates an ongoing process of creation. Hence, taking Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of the face of Christ as a starting point, the present article aims toward an experimental theological exploration. By considering the notion of the cross-event as machine, I attempt, if only briefly in this format, to investigate the possibility of exploring the multiplicity rather than the singular identity of the Christ-notion; the ongoing creative aspect rather than the origin–telos spectrum. In the following, the notion of the cross as machine will be introduced by way of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s machine constructions, and through Russian constructivist thinker and artist Liubov Popova (1889–1924). In other words, we shall set out on a theologically experimental journey, inviting non-theological thinkers to throw new light on a theological dilemma: the exclusive and authoritarian aspects of the Christ figure. Finally, we shall return to the history of Christianity to suggest alternative images of Christ.

Machines and Constructivism

When introducing one of their notions of the machine – *the desiring machines* – in *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari write:

We live today in the age of partial objects, bricks that have been shattered to bits, and leftovers. We no longer believe in the myth of the existence of fragments that, like pieces of an antique statue, are merely waiting for the last one to be turned up, so that they may all be glued back together to create a unity that is precisely the same as the original unity.⁴

3. Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 177.

4. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London 2004, 45.

The notion of the one Origin is lost, they argue in 1972. The very idea that the past can be recovered, or that identity is singular, is lost to their time. “We no longer believe in a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some future day,” they continue. Neither the past nor the future will provide us with a unity that explains it all, nor a point where it all comes together:

We no longer believe in the dull gray outlines of a dreary, colorless dialectic of evolution, aimed at forming a harmonious whole out of heterogeneous bits by rounding off their rough edges. We believe only in totalities that are peripheral.

That is to say, there may be totalities, systems, theories, or organizations that form a whole, a unity, but their organization is contingent, changeable, and consisting of separate pieces: “And if we discover such a totality alongside various separate parts, it is a whole of these particular parts but does not unify them; rather, it is added to them as a new part fabricated separately.”⁵ In other words, machines, in Deleuze and Guattari’s account, are constructions of separate parts. The construction does not unite the parts but organizes them. The construction as such indicates finally nothing but construction itself, the possibility to construct and construction as immanent action. A machine is not a given, it is a construction; an organization of separate elements. A machine is made up of partial objects, forming a whole out of heterogeneous bits – not because they belong together, not because they were meant for each other, but because creation is possible, construction is possible. Nothing is given but the abstract machine which is the very possibility to construct, and construction as immanent action.

If the image of Jesus has remained largely the same from the sixth century until the present day, then follows, according to Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis, that representational identity has been used to denote the kernel of Christian faith during that same period. Throughout art history, however, artists have endeavored to break with the logic of depiction and representation. The very idea that there is a true reality that may be depicted, or that the reality depicted is more real than the reality created on the canvas, have been questioned in different ways through the history of art. One such movement, and one that went further than most in this regard, appeared in Russia in the beginning of the last century. Thinker and artist Liubov Popova was one of the leading figures of the Russian Constructivist art movement, founded around 1913. The movement grew out of Cubism,

5. Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 45–46.

Futurism and Suprematism, but what was unique to the Constructivists was their emphasis on technology and machines, mathematics, measuring tools, geometrical shapes; circles, squares, and triangles. In Popova's artistic vision, construction was to replace representation in art; the notion of depiction should, in her regard, give way to a notion of an ongoing construction. The infinite possibilities to construct out of the very elements of life was at the heart of her artistic endeavor. While their endeavors appear separately, with Popova the critique of representation in Deleuze and Guattari as sketched above turns into a concrete artistic practice. This practice, I will argue, may inspire contemporary theology.

Liubov Popova

Liubov Popova was renowned, an undisputed artistic authority yet her work and thought have not been as scholarly scrutinized as that of colleagues like Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953) or Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956), nor discussed in relation to the branches of twentieth-century thought to which it has obvious connections. Her gender is one likely reason for the lack of scholarly attention, but another is the often-described incongruence of her contribution: on the one hand she was a political materialist artist yet on the other hand a spiritual artist inspired by the Russian icon tradition and the platonic spirituality of Suprematism and Rayism. What is regarded as an incongruence from an art historical perspective, however, could be a vantage point from a theological perspective. Consequently, we shall enter her work precisely at the intersection of the materialistic and the spiritual; an intersection that relates to the move beyond representation which she shares with Deleuze and Guattari.⁶

In art history, Popova says, there has been a gradual development away from representation and depiction, leading at one stage to what she describes as the distortion of elements.⁷ We can think, for instance, of Picasso's cubist faces where the elements that make up the face are taken apart and put back together, reorganized, thus distorting the face depicted.

But distortion was just a stage, Popova continues. The *distortion* of elements later led to *transformation* of the very understanding of elements: to a transformation of the understanding of that which makes up the object as object – the volume, the color, the lines, the weight, and this is Popova's

6. Svetlana Boym, "From the Russian Soul to Post-Communist Nostalgia", *Representations* 49 (1995), 133.

7. Liubov Popova, "The Question of the New Methodology of Instruction (First Discipline of the Basic Department of the Vkhutemas Painting Faculty)", in Dmitri V. Sarabianov & Natalia L. Adaskina (eds), *Popova*, New York 1990, 376.

own artistic vision.⁸ As the director of the Inkhuk in Moscow, she repeatedly argues that elements should no longer be regarded as pieces of an object – pieces that one can take apart and put together slightly differently thus still relating to the original object – but as coincidental parts. In Popova’s words:

The object as such is no longer studied and depicted, only the separate formal elements on which it can be laid out and from which it is composed; only that which defines the concept of the object and not all the elements in order of their existence in the object. The artist has gone from an imagination-depiction of the object to an analysis of the concepts comprising the object’s essence.⁹

The parts, in turn, she says, must be researched in the laboratories, or analyzed, scientifically, mathematically so that their functions and utilities appear far beyond the confines of former functions or ideas; beyond any idea limited by habitual thinking, by notions of origin and truth, or limited by earlier styles or artistic ideals.¹⁰ Her artistic vision appears to rest on an assumption: if we are to see the possibilities of the objects, we must liberate the elements from habitual representational thought.

Accordingly, applying Popova’s account of representation to the depiction of Jesus, to re-interpret the face of Christ, to “rearrange” it in the sense of depicting it outside the common norms and expectations parallels the cubist endeavor, the cubist distortion. As we have seen, however, to Popova distortion was just a stage on the way to transformation since distortion still related to the object rather than to its comprising elements. Subsequently, interpretational twists in relation to the face of Jesus might momentarily open for new ideas of what *the face of faces* might look like, yet it inevitably evokes the original from which it deviates.

Distortions of the face risk letting the original face, that we know so well, stand forth as precisely that; as the original in relation to which the variety is nothing but an exception from the norm. In line with Popova’s constructivist thinking, however, the face of faces should not be distorted but completely transformed by attention paid to the parts of its construction, and to the possibility of construction as such. Before attempting to explore the theological implications of such a statement, let us take a closer look at her work and thought to appreciate what such transformation could entail in an artistic context.

8. Popova, “The Question”, 376.

9. Popova, “The Question”, 375.

10. Liubov Popova, “On the Construction of New Objective and Nonobjective Forms”, in Dmitri V. Sarabianov & Natalia L. Adaskina (eds), *Popova*, New York 1990, 349.

Constructing with Spiritual Material

As director of the Inkhuk, Popova is thinking art anew and society along with it. To her, art is political and the political is material, it is concrete; colours, lines, rulers, passers, and machines. In Popova's papers presented at the art institutes in Moscow (Inkhuk and Vkhutemas) during these years, a far-reaching renewal of the very notion of the material takes place, and in her paintings from this period she transgresses the border between the material and the spiritual. From 1920 onwards, Popova left the vocabulary of the spiritually oriented Suprematist movement for that of the politically oriented Constructivist movement, but her notion of matter was not a simple choice between the political and the mystique, the material and the spiritual.¹¹ Moreover, and unlike other artistic schools in Russia at the time, despite merging the material and the spiritual, her understanding of matter was not grounded on an idealist account. In her early Painterly Architectonics' period, her treatment of space and planarity, colour and layering resembled that of the Russian icon – which remained a source of inspiration for her.¹² In her late paintings labelled Spatial Force Constructions, the spiritual dimension was still present, yet in this part of her oeuvre, which has been named her "rayic" work, she used rays to materialize – to turn into building material – the cosmic infinity earlier treated by Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962), and Michail Larionov (1881–1964) in explicitly spiritual terms.

Unlike Malevich's Suprematism and Larionov's and Goncharova's Rayism, however, Popova's lines, or rays, did not aim to capture the ideal truth of reality. Rayism was grounded in a certain metaphysics, in an idea of the inner structure of reality. Malevich's Suprematism, in turn, shared with Wassily Kandinsky's (1866–1944) notion of the "spiritual in art," the "inner necessity," the aspect of being grounded in a platonic idea of the true forms of reality. Contrary to both of these movements, Popova did not aim to achieve reality but to construct reality in accordance with the Constructivists' slogan: "Life-building; not life-knowing."¹³ To Popova, the material with which to build life was not, however, stable and lifeless, but rayic, changeable, and flexible. "This is the opportune moment to create," she states at The Institute for Artistic Culture in Moscow in 1921. "Out of the constant old elements – old only because in the end we have only the same concrete matter – a new organization of these elements is created." The loss of origin, the leaving behind of representation, opens the "old" elements

11. Dmitri V. Sarabianov, "Painting", in Dmitri V. Sarabianov & Natalia L. Adaskina (eds), *Popova*, New York 1990, 142.

12. Sarabianov, "Painting", 137.

13. Sarabianov, "Painting", 141.

to the endless possibilities of construction, her reasoning goes, why now is the time to create. As an artist, she described herself as “not an artist,” but *a constructor* – a constructor of concepts and elements. To that extent, she was also replaceable. Anyone deeply acquainted with the elements, anyone having entered into the elements, and who had left behind the ideas of representation, of external realities, of styles as theoretical meta-structures and, instead, had studied the elements from within, could do what she did. It was not about artistic ingenuity, not about her own subjective mind.¹⁴ Constructivism was an art of the ruler and the passer, not of the genius artist’s hand. The artist was, of course – we must remember again the time, the setting – *a worker, an engineer* constructing artistic machines. After 1921, the constructivists consequently officially rejected easel painting. Art, they said, was no longer for canvases and galleries but for life, for the people. Artists like themselves, who were acquainted with the immanence of the elements, who could construct reality anew and from within should do so in order to serve utility, to serve the requirements of everyday life; constructing stoves, clothes, and kitchen things. Even after the official rejection of easel painting, however, Popova herself kept painting and whether a coincidence or not this inconsistency corresponds to another paradoxical aspect of her work and thought: repeatedly she pronounces the new, while simultaneously underlining that while all is new, nothing ever is. Opening one of her lectures at The Higher State Art-Technical Studios she articulates the paradox: “Now what? What’s next? That is the eternal question.”

Popova never lived to encounter the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari but the emphasis on construction as a constant becoming beyond the logic of representation is an assumption shared among the three. The constructivist ideas were also spread in Europe in the early and mid-twentieth century.¹⁵ In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari describe what they call *the abstract machine*: “The abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality.” The abstract machine, to them, is the very unfolding of complexity, a blooming of multiplicity inseparable from life which, in turn, resembles Popova’s visionary account of construction.

To use Popova as a source of inspiration for political theology is at once questionable and important. For several reasons, but for one reason in particular: she was a key voice in the Russian Avant-Garde and thus supported the Russian revolution. She wanted the revolution and was initially happy

14. Briony Fer, “What’s in a Line? Gender and Modernity”, *Oxford Art Journal* 13:1 (1990), 87.

15. The breadth of the movement is depicted in Barrett Watten, *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics*, Middletown, CT 2003.

for it, she believed in it. She never lived to see the terrible consequences, however, as she died of scarlet fever in 1924. Artists like her later had to flee from Russia, as nonobjective art was banned in 1932. Yet we cannot know for sure that her ideas would have made a difference – there is no vaccine against totalitarianism. She supported the people’s revolt against the establishment and the people succeeded, but they ended up with a more totalitarian regime than the one they had left behind. It is vital to keep the result in mind, and to digest their ideas, since Popova’s time resembles ours as a time of in-between, where old authorities are weakened, questioned, and the political scene is changing and open for change. Popova was desperate for new political solutions, for a vision for the future and, from her artistic perspective, she suggested a way forward: a humble approach to the elements of reality in order to take part in the ongoing construction of the world, and to explore yet unseen possibilities of the materials.

Aware of the seeds of totalitarianism that may be detected in the constructivist thought, yet with an openness to rethink contemporary notions of Christ, what could theology bring from this artistic trajectory? What could be brought from Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of the imagery of Jesus’ face? A theology that would invite the critique of representation in Popova and in Deleuze and Guattari could, possibly, draw close to a contemporary form of iconoclasm with a constructive aim. Together with Deleuze and Guattari, as above, it would note the limits of depiction and the normative boundaries it sets up; with Popova, it would note the possibility to construct out of old elements, yet beyond habitual objectives. In the final section of this article, I will take these insights into regard and consider imagery from the Christian theological tradition that, contrary to the image of Jesus’ face, could open theology to the notion of an ongoing construction.

The Celestial Machine

According to Giorgio Agamben, the notion of the machine is not new to Christian theology; it was used in early Christianity to designate the cross-event. Pseudo-Athanasius and Ignatius of Antioch (35–108), he argues, used the notion of the machine or *the celestial machine* to describe the cross, the cross as a machine.¹⁶ The expression refers to the ancient machine, *mechane*, that gave us the word machine as such, which was a construction at the Greek theatre, a wooden arm that lifted a god onto the stage. The *mechane* lifted the god or god-actor up from behind the scene, lowered him or her in the actors’ midst and then, after the plot was changed by the divine presence

16. Giorgio Agamben, *The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and the End of Days*, Stanford, CA 2017, 32.

the *mechane* lifted god back up again, off the stage until the next performance. The expression *deus ex machina* refers to this machine – the expression used in literature and filmmaking to designate the unexpected rescuer, the saviour suddenly placed in the hopeless reality of the main characters. *Deus ex machina* – “god from the machine” – from the Greek *mechane* is also referred to as *the celestial machine*. According to Agamben, the celestial machine, in turn, with its connotations to the Greek theatre construction, was brought into early Christian theology as a reference to 1 Cor. 4:9: “We have become a theater for the world, of angels and human beings.”¹⁷ I am not suggesting that the early uses of machine imagery in Christianity carry the same meaning as expressed above, but I will suggest that it makes a difference if Christ is a face or if Christ is a machine – if the kernel of Christianity is described through figurative depiction or through mechanical imagery.

First, if the cross-event is a machine – a celestial machine – rather than a face, then the cross-event, Christ as event, becomes action rather than identity. The cross-event as celestial machine is what it does – constantly moving, stuck in its repetitious motion, persistently repeating its motion of sinking/rising, dying/resurrecting through history, liturgy, theological analysis, and art, as well as through collective and individual experiences of faith. Hence, the repetition of the cross-event also becomes a repetition of difference. Not a repetition of the original event connected to the one recognizable identity, but a perpetual event recognizable through its action, its motion. Moreover, following Popova, we as *theology-mechanics* or *theology-constructors*, may take part in constructing. We may take part and take apart; deconstruct the theological constructions, piece by piece; analyze them in the laboratories: what is *to die*, *to sink*, *to rise*, *to live*, if we take one plug, one plank at the time? What is to sink if detached from the possibility of rising, what is to rise detached from the possibility of sinking? What is *to live* without *to die*? What is to repeat without death, without the end of repetition? What is movement? What is movement without height and depth? Then, to reconstruct, to nail movement onto dying, to hammer rising onto repeating, to glue living onto sinking. Perhaps also to dig deep among the old elements and unveil fragments of constructivism in the Christian past, as with the ancient Christian symbol of the wheel, earlier than the face as discussed above, from the time when the depiction of a face was not only limiting but possibly even blasphemous. The Greek letters of *Ichty*s are brought together constructing a wheel of the separate parts, with the cross at its centre as one element among several.

17. Agamben, *The Mystery of Evil*, 32.

Inspired by the critique of representation developed outside the theological sphere in the twentieth century, we may unearth related notions in the history of theology where the discussion of the possibility to depict the divine has been an ongoing debate. Here, I merely suggest two such notions but there are more to be uncovered or constructed. Whether it begets a transformation or merely a distortion, I believe that experimenting with the notions of theology as a constructivist practice and the cross as a *celestial machine* does open new spaces for theological thought. Through the notion of the cross as a die-and-live-again-machine, forever repeating death-and-life, forever killing God, forever reviving God in this world; a repetitious death and resurrection repeated in infinite varieties in theology, art, music, film, and church life, Christ stands forth as an immanent and concrete movement with incalculable implications.

If there is no origin, however, no original identity in the sense of a norm in relation to which expressions vary, are there no limits? Is not reality as machine, Christianity as machine, open to anything? Well, a quick look around the contemporary political reality with its many different Christian alliances within the political right as well as the political left suggests that the Christianity machine is more complex and multifaceted than the different fractions often acknowledge. There is, as stated above, no vaccine against totalitarianism; it may grow in Christian theology, in communism, constructivism, trumpism, and delezianism, but *if* that is where an experimental theology beyond representation would end up, it would be because it had forgotten the only principle we have encountered in this thinking thus far. There is a principle shared by Popova and Deleuze and Guattari: Construction is the only given. The process of constructing, or of becoming, is the given, not the representations that aim to reveal the one identity. Hence, if we are to take part in such a theological construction we must acquire a deep humility in relation to construction as such, to its endless possibilities, and, Popova would add, in relation to the elements. A deep acquaintance with what constitutes us, our space, volume, color, weight, as well as the fragments of knowledge, the bits of world, historical, political, and theological leftovers that make up our thinking. For us, as theology-constructors, the material with which to work are the texts, the liturgy, the dogma, the history, the experiences, the narratives, and the elements they comprise. While construction is endless and the material changes through history, the theological building material nonetheless marks the limits of our theological constructions in each time. Hence, only with a deep and humble acquaintance can we truly begin to reorganize the fragments, while they,

of course, also reorganize us, whatever we were, reorganize our mechanic appearances and performances. ▲

SUMMARY

Starting in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's critique of the image of the face of Christ, the article experimentally explores the notion of the cross-event as machine. Through an encounter between Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the abstract machine and Russian avant-garde artist and thinker Liubov Popova's notion of construction, the article explores the multiplicity rather than the singular identity of the Christ-notion; the ongoing creative aspect rather than the origin–telos spectrum. Thus, the article invites non-theological thinkers to throw new light on a theological dilemma: the exclusive and authoritarian aspects of the Christ figure. Finally, alternative images of Christ to be found in the history of Christianity are suggested.