

# Reconstruction Deconstructed

## *A Response to Petra Carlsson*

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The aim of her article, Petra Carlsson tells us, is to “suggest alternative images of Christ.” She wishes to “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.” Hence, her focus is the depiction of Christ, but the depiction of Christ as symptomatic of a theological position.

The article starts off with a consideration of Christ’s face, its pictorial rendition, but moves from this, via the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, to a consideration of faciality. “The face,” we are told, “grounds the very idea of a correlate and its deviation.” Further on: “The face grounds identity.”

Point being: The face of Christ is symptomatic of a theology of (Platonic) truth.<sup>1</sup> Christ is a clear-cut figure, with a clear-cut message, that clear-cuts the world (“The face grounds identity [...] it forms a ground on which to judge”). The face of Christ, as Carlsson makes it out, anchors a metatheological position that sees theology as a harbinger of an idea that is fixed and final and forever the same. A Platonic idea, of sorts.

She then goes on to contrast the concept of a face with the concept of

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1. Carlsson: “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.”

machine: “A machine, as opposed to a face, does not indicate a singular identity, but points instead to a former multiplicity.” In other words, identity *versus* multiplicity. The clear-cut figure, with the clear-cut message, contra *the construction*, the assembled Christ (Deleuze *versus* Plato).

At the same time, another shift occurs. Alongside the shift from face to machine, Carlsson shifts from face to cross:

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.

The idea Carlsson pursues, therefore, is not related to *the image* of Christ in terms of depiction – though it may seem that way – but, rather, the image in terms of symbolization (face/cross), and how that symbolization encodes and anchors a metatheological view.

It is important to note this, because after the above explained clarifications, Carlsson goes on to a consideration of construction *versus* depiction. Building upon the Russian painter Liubov Popova’s (1889–1924) theory of art, Carlsson argues that depiction has been challenged and contested from within art itself. Artists have wanted to free themselves from unnecessary constraints. The ideal of representationality has come to be viewed as an unnecessary inhibition. Why depict and represent, when one can *create*? Art, Popova argues, should be “life-building; not life-knowing.” (Note the Marxist undertones in this, just see Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*.<sup>2</sup>)

There is a radical vision in Popova, a sort of self-conscious radical vision. She believes painting is impossible without a fundamental openness to what is to come, without continual deconstruction and reconstruction. As Carlsson quotes her: “Now what? What’s next? That is the eternal question.” There is no endgame to art, no grand, final conclusions, no Hegelian crescendo. Art is marked by a blind striving toward continual creation, toward construction and the free play of its elements. A logic thwarted by the always identical depiction of Christ.

So, what if, Carlsson asks, if we, as theologians, take our cue from Popova? What would happen if we “rethink contemporary notions of Christ,

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2. “Theses on Feuerbach”, in Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 1, Moscow 1969, 13–15.

what could theology bring from this artistic trajectory?” Put another way, what happens if we no longer view the image of Christ in terms of depiction, but rather as a *machine*? A funny thing happens. The machine is namely already in place at the heart of theology. The word “machine” comes from the Greek *mechane*, denoting the contraption (the construction) used to lift gods unto the stage in Greek tragic plays. The use of this machine is tantamount to what we know as the plot device: *deus ex machina*, where the abrupt appearance of something extraordinary solves the unsolvable.

Associatively speaking, it is a short jump from the idea of a contraption lifting a god unto the stage and the cross – lifting Christ unto the stage of death and resurrection. And “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.”

This approach to Christ allows us to see theology in a new light, or this is what Carlsson suggests. The approach allows us to see theology *machinically*. To think of Christ – and to think of *the thought* of Christ, the image or symbolization – as a machine, as something that whirrs and hums and operates and moves:

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.

Moreover, as something that is constructed, built through the combination of bits and pieces, it is an assemblage, and not something that *re-presents*. The position Carlsson describes reminds of what Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) wrote about James Joyce’s (1882–1941) *Ulysses*: “His writing is not *about* something, *it is that something itself*.”<sup>3</sup> The machinic Christ is not about something, it is something.

Metatheologically, this forces us to reflect upon the nature of this machine that we construct: What is included in our cross-event? How do we build it? What does it do?

If anything, these latter questions seem to be the heart of what Carlsson is getting at in her article: “Hence, if we are to take part in such a theological construction we must acquire a deep humility in relation to construction as

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3. “Dante... Bruno. Vico... Joyce”, in Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, New York 1984, 27.

such, to its endless possibilities, and, Popova would add, in relation to the elements.”

Though undoubtedly bold and experimental, or precisely because it is bold and experimental, Carlsson’s article leaves me with some unanswered questions: What, for example, motivates the shift from Christ’s face to the cross? What in the concept of the machine, other than the associative leap through the *mechane*, is it that connects the machine to the cross more than the face? Cannot the face be a machine? What, exactly, *is* a machine? How, exactly, is the machinic instantiated in Christ, or the image of Christ? Put differently, what, exactly, is it that the Christ-machine *does*? Bring us hope? Well, no, not in Carlsson’s model, seeing it as if the Christ-machine is wholly immanent, there is nothing to hope *for*. And if we, metatheologically, approach theology as a wholly immanent, open-ended endeavor, as Popova does art, what is the point? To unlock something continually new? Why? What is the value of novelty? What is the value of reconstruction? ▲