Reconceptualizing *kairos*

JENS E. KJELDSEN

We learn more from the ancient *auctores* and their concepts, writes Øivind Andersen 'if we study how they unfold in their own age, in their own environment, on their own terms'.[1] It would certainly be foolhardy to question Andersen on the ancient *auctores*, but a quick glance at contemporary rhetorical research reveals that no other contemporary field of research turns to concepts developed in antiquity as much as the study of rhetoric. Fortunately, Andersen acknowledges that the ancients also 'offer huge potential for modern theory, provided they are reconceptualized into modern terms'.[2]

While you do not expect current students of medicine to read the works of Hippocrates to become good doctors or medical scholars, you cannot become an acknowledged scholar of rhetoric unless you have read Aristotle and Cicero. Humans still seek to influence each other by appealing to ethos, logos and pathos, and we still seek the available means of persuasion in much the same way. Therefore many of the ancient rhetorical concepts are still relevant today. However, as Andersen advises, these concepts must be reconceptualized. One such concept is *kairos*.

Kairos in antiquity

Kairos is a complicated term with a complex web of meanings. Most scholars, however, agree that the two central aspects of the concept are the right or opportune moment to do something and the proper measure of something. It also seems to be generally agreed that *kairos* is a counterpart of *chronos*.[3] While *chronos* is the view of time as a continuous flow, an understanding of time in a linear fashion as 'time passing', *kairos* is understood as the puncturing of *chronos*; it is an opening providing an opportunity. Onians, for instance, explains that the earliest Greek uses of the term in contexts of combat and weaving referred to an opening through which a weapon could find its way or through which a woof-thread could be shot through the warp.[4]

The rhetorical understanding of *kairos* is thus a combination of dimensions. On the one hand, there is a spatial dimension that indicates an opening of a

---

1   Andersen 2011, 248.
2   Andersen 1997; Andersen 2011, 248.
3   Smith 1969; Kinneavy 1986, 80; Kinneavy 2002; Sipiora 2002, 2.
4   Onians 1973, 343–8. See also Miller 1992, 313 and Miller 1994, 83–4.

rhetorical void, a '"problem-space" that a rhetor can occupy for advantage'[5]: an archer must make the arrow hit exactly the place in the armour where there is an opening that can be penetrated. On the other hand, *kairos* has a temporal dimension that indicates a time to act: a weaver must send the shuttle through at the exact moment there is an opening in the weaving threads. In this temporal sense, the puncturing of *chronos* opens up a limited amount of time, allowing an orator to seize the moment, before opportunity again disappears.

The idea of 'proper measure' provides a third dimension. If a window of opportunity opens up, then seizing the moment depends on what we say and how we say it. We may lose the moment if we wait too long or if we do not adapt to the possibilities of the situation and then provide the wrong kind or measure of rhetoric. Andersen calls this 'the aptum-correlated concept of *kairos*', the weaker (or internal) *kairos*-concept, because it is about 'taking into account the circumstances, the audience, oneself and the subject as required by the rules of what is *prepon* and *aptum*'.[6] This internal concept belongs to system or method. However, there is also a stronger *kairos*-concept that belongs to theory. It concerns 'the very foundations of what determines and characterizes rhetorical discourse'. While the weaker concept is concerned with what one does in rhetoric, the stronger is concerned with what rhetoric does in the world.[7]

Reconceptualizing kairos

Even though *kairos* is an ancient concept, it should be obvious that these kairotic dimensions and circumstances are equally relevant today. Nonetheless, reconceptualizing *kairos* in a contemporary context still poses challenges. For one thing, *kairos* – much like rhetoric in general – deals with fleeting matters that defy being tied down as a *techne*. It is no coincidence that Lysippus' (*c*.360–*c*.320 BC) statue of *Kairos* has winged feet.

While it may be possible to create a general rhetorical *techne* of the stronger *kairos*-concept, it is difficult to do the same for the weaker concept. The stronger concept teaches us about the indeterminacy and situatedness of communication; it emphasizes the uniqueness and unpredictability of situations. As noted by Sipiora, such conditions make it

---

5 Miller 1994, 84.

6 Andersen 2011, 242.

7 Andersen 2011, 241–2.

impossible for speakers to control discourse by planning or by previous theory. Since each discourse must be shaped in immediate response to the present occasion, instruction in *kairos* becomes virtually impossible. While theory, grounded in successful past discourse, provides models of right and wrong strategies, rhetorical theory cannot cast its net over the unforeseen, unpredictable, and uncontrollable moments.[8]

This is why attempts to develop a *techne* for the weaker concept mostly end up in platitudes claiming that you should always say the right thing at the right moment. It is not difficult to disagree with such general tenets. However, *when* exactly the time is right and *what* exactly may be the right thing to say is not easily determined and cannot be put into a formula.

Kairos and rhetorical situation

This raises the question of whether it is possible to reconceptualize *kairos* as a contemporary rhetorical *techne*? Most scholars who try to do so put forward Lloyd F. Bitzer's account of the rhetorical situation as a contemporary theory of *kairos*.[9]

Kinneavy equates *kairos* with the rhetorical situation, which he calls 'situational context'.[10] This is stretching it a bit too far, according to Andersen.[11] And he is right. *Kairos* and Bitzer's theory both deal with situation, but in different ways. The concept of *kairos* focuses on situation as an opportunity seen from the viewpoint of the orator (the weaker concept), and it generally describes the roles of changeability, indeterminacy, and uncertainty that form the precondition for rhetorical communication (the stronger concept). The theory of rhetorical situation, on the other hand, describes certain structural circumstances, which bring about rhetoric.

However, in both the notion of kairos and the theory of the rhetorical situation, a rhetorical space opens up and creates a rhetorical situation. The kairotic perspective emphasizes the openness and opportunities that such rhetorical spaces offer a speaker, while the perspective of the rhetorical situation emphasizes the exigencies and constraints of such spaces, which invite – and almost prescribe – a fitting response. Both are seen from the perspective of an orator, but Bitzer's account of the circumstances for rhetoric makes it almost a social scientific theory. His first article from 1968 accounted for the constitutive elements of the rhetorical situation (exigency, constraints,

---

8   Sipiora 2002, 6.
9   Bitzer 1968.
10 Kinneavy 1986.
11 Andersen 1997, 2011.

and audience). Bitzer later developed the theory in his 1980 article. Even though this article mentions neither *chronos* nor *kairos*, its description of the stages of the rhetorical situation is actually a description of the elements of *chronos*. A rhetorical situation has four stages: 1) origin and development, 2) maturity, 3) deterioration, and 4) disintegration. The stage of *maturity* is the stage of *kairos*. This is the moment where the situation is ripe for rhetorical intervention. The development of the four stages fits with the characteristics of *chronos* as described by Smith: 1) motion and process, 2) measuring units 'numbering' the movement and the elapsed time, and 3) a serial order.[12]

In opposition to the traditional understanding of the kairotic moment, stage two in Bitzer's theory can last for a second, for a century, or even forever. So, while rhetorical situations can persist, 'conceivably some persist indefinitely',[13] the kairotic, in contrast, is normally understood in terms of swift, shifting conditions.

Contemporary reconceptualizations of kairos

The rhetorical situation has evolved into a theory of recurring situations. Because 'comparable situations occur, prompting comparable responses',[14] we have developed a rhetorical genre theory which is both descriptive and normative. It describes how we normally respond to situations and prescribes what would generally be the fitting responses to the different kinds of recurring situations. Rhetorical genres are conventionalized kairotic moments. In this way, it is not so much the orator who seizes the moment but rather it is the moment that directs the orator to talk. There is not enough indeterminacy or unexpectedness in the situation for rhetorical genres to be kairotic moments in the originally Classical sense. Because genres represent recurring situations, they can be anticipated and controlled, which is exactly why it is possible to create a techne, a theory, about them.

Kairos, on the other hand, is about that which cannot be controlled: the indeterminacy and changeability of fleeting moments. This may help to explain the peculiar fact that several of the reconceptualizations of *kairos* in contemporary rhetorical studies examine phenomena that appear to be most typical of contemporary society and most removed from the ancients: science, technology, risk society, visual activism, and media.[15] For instance, in her study of the rhetoric of science, Carolyn Miller explored how *kairos*

---

12 Smith 1969, 2–3.
13 Bitzer 1968, 12–13.
14 Bitzer 1968, 13. Cf. Jamieson 1973, who was among the first to connect situation and genre.
15 Miller 1992; Miller 1994; Scott 2006; Stephenson 2009; Sheridan et al. 2009; Kelly et al. 2014.

created 'opportunities for belief'. New scientific discoveries can only be communicated – or perhaps only be made – when the difference between novelty and tradition opens up a kairotic opportunity. *Kairos* in science, Miller writes, can be understood as operating in two arenas:

> it is both a conceptual or intellectual space, understood as the opportunity provided by explanatory problems, and a social or professional space, understood by the opportunity provided by a forum of interaction. Both of these spaces change constantly and are always subject to appropriation and redefinition.

As Miller points out, *kairos* teaches us about 'the complex nature of rhetorical context, or situation'. It makes us see not only the temporal aspect of context, but also the spatial; it points not only to the objective, but also to the subjective dimensions of rhetorical situations.[16]

In a later piece on technology, Miller illustrates how '*kairos* in technical discourse functions primarily to create opportunities for opportunity'.[17] Appeals to seize the opportune moment are pervasive in technology-talk, Miller explains, because they promise predictability, control, and advantage to what otherwise would be an uncertain and unknowable future. Technological change is different from scientific progress because the kairotic moment is not now but in the future, which is why the 'technological forecasting' of threats or advantages is a way of creating opportunities for opportunity.[18]

Scott makes similar observations in his treatment of 'Kairos as Indeterminate Risk Management' in relation to the pharmaceutical industry's response to bioterrorism after 9/11. Instead of a 'modernist', grounded notion of *kairos* as a controlling agent seizing an advantage, he proposes an alternative notion of *kairos* as 'the indeterminate response to unbounded, immeasurable, unpredictable, and ultimately uncontrollable global risks'.[19]

The sophistic condition

I am not sure how a classicist would regard such reconceptualizations of *kairos*, but there is no doubt that the kairotic perspective helps the contemporary researcher to understand the rhetoric of our time, because the

---

16 Miller 1992, 320 and 322. Bitzer has been accused by Richard Vatz (1973) of having a deterministic, objective view of rhetoric that leaves only limited agency to the orator. In contrast with this view, Vatz claims that it is not the situation that determines the rhetorical response, but the orator that defines the situation. For this reason, Vatz' position has been called subjective (Miller 1992; Miller 1994).
17 Miller 1994, 93.
18 Miller *ibid*.
19 Scott 2006, 137.

concept of *kairos* seems remarkably well suited to the study of contemporary society. Part of the explanation for this, I think, is that we are in many ways now returning to a sophistic condition. In a world of globalization, pluralism, convergence, mediatization, and technological changes, rhetorical situations have become more complex, fragmented, changeable, and incalculable.[20] This contemporary sophistic condition revives questions of rhetorical agency and relativism, and provides new importance to *kairos*.

Modern media have added situational complexity by transforming the public sphere into a rhetorical arena of multi-mediated communication, thus obscuring the traditional sense of communicator and audience. Mass media and new media have created a plurality of situations, wherein speakers simultaneously address many different groups of audiences and situational exigencies. This became obvious in the cartoon crisis of 2005 and 2006, when the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed (30 November 2005). The editors meant to initiate a local Danish discussion on freedom of speech, but in a globalized and mediated world, such manifestations quickly gain a life of their own – completely independent of the intentions of the communicator.

Communicators – especially political speakers – are victims of journalistic framing and the mediated fragmentation of their utterances. The traditional political speech is afforded little space or time. It has been replaced by forms of dialogue such as the interview, the debate, or the press conference. These forms of communication are constrained by the management of journalists and editors, and thereby limit the orators' influence on what he or she is saying and on the mediated journeys of his or her words. Journalists, observers, and commentators use quotations out of context, and they frame, prime, and set their own agendas. When the words have been disseminated, new players throw themselves into debates, and the use of decontextualized utterances set their agendas. Thus, the space for rhetorical action is constantly changing and, consequently, so is *kairos*.

Utterances, conduct, everything that can be represented through words, sounds, and pictures take on a life of their own in a fragmented, uncontrollable public sphere. Utterances are disseminated to audiences outside the initial communication situation, to unintended recipients. This creates new rhetorical situations, while new responses to different groups of audiences are also demanded; these situations produce rhetoric, which is not discrete or intentional in the traditional sense, but rather is a mosaic marked by a continuous flow, bricolage, and constant change.

---

20 Kjeldsen 2008a and 2008b.

This changeability is simultaneously forming and being formed by the increased speed and compression of time in society and communication.[21] We used to think about travel time in weeks or months, now we mostly think in minutes and hours. It used to take days to deliver a letter; an email arrives in less than a second. Newspapers used to give us the latest news every morning, but now we have the story of the politician's gaffe online only minutes after it happened – with pictures from the cell phones of observers. A youth – and many adults, for that matter – who does not respond to a text or a Snapchat within a few minutes, or even seconds, does not demonstrate the appropriate online behaviour. The proper time for answering has already passed. The time between *kairos*' puncturing of *chronos* seems to be becoming constantly smaller and smaller. Almost every moment becomes a moment that can be seized or lost.

While all this probably sounds far away from the ancient concept of *kairos* – and of course in many ways it is – some circumstances are similar to the circumstances that the ancients mention when discussing *kairos*. Kairos, as Isocrates, Plato, and Alcidamas used it, was tightly connected with the communication situation of the spoken word, where changes and turns dominated, and swiftness and the ability to adapt was essential. In his text *On Those Who Deliver Written Speeches* or *On Sophists*, for instance, Alcidamas writes that for people who ask for 'speedy help in their law-suits', producing written speeches is too slow (Alcidamas. *Soph*. 10).[22] And would it not be ridiculous if, when a citizen is asked to speak or when the 'water-clock in the courts was already running', the speaker 'were to proceed to his writing tablet in order to assemble and con his speech?'(Alcidamas. *Soph*. 11). No, the speaker must be able to appropriately express things on the spur of the moment and make good use of the critical moment, and to do this he must have a 'flexible mind and a well-stocked and ready memory … keen to acquire an ability to make speeches which correspond to the needs of life' (Alcidamas. *Soph*. 34). As Andersen points out, Alcidamas' horizon is the courtroom or the people's assembly; here 'the speaker needs to respond immediately, discuss unexpected arguments, and in all things to be capable of adapting himself to the exigencies of the moment'.[23]

There is much talk these days of the dialogical possibilities of interactive IT-technology, online communication, and the dynamic character of social media. Such traits of modern media are often viewed in contrast with the most ancient of all rhetorical means: speech and dialogue. However, as suggested

21 Virilio 2006; Kelly *et al*. 2014.
22 All translations are from Muir (2001).
23 Andersen 2011, 244.

by Alcidamas' text, speechmaking and dialogue can be every bit as interactive, changeable, and dynamic as any online activity. The spoken word is inherently dialogical. It allows for swift changes and immediate responses: something is said and we react instantly. These traits are also characteristic of new media. Online communication is a place for quick response, unprepared comments, swift changes, dialogue, and shifting opportunities. The changeability, speed, and relativism that in this way seem to dominate our times and create a contemporary sophistic condition are the reason why *kairos* is as relevant now as it was in antiquity.

This sophistic condition is also the reason why the scholarly study of rhetoric and *kairos* are still relevant even now: perhaps more than ever before we find ourselves in a situation where the human situation cannot be captured by fixed rules. Humans cannot be understood only in the light of research trying step by step to uncover elements of what a human being consists of or how one persuades another. Much has changed since the time of the ancients, but the human condition is still largely the same as it was 2500 years ago.

Of course, Andersen is right in saying that we should study how the ancient *auctores* and their concepts unfold in their own age, in their own environment, and on their own terms. However, even though there is a risk of untimely anachronism, there is no doubt, I think, that contemporary reconceptualizations of *kairos* can teach us much about our own times.

References

Andersen, Øivind. (1997) 'Rette ord i rette tid Kairos i klassisk retorikk'. *Rhetorica Scandinavica* 1, 4: 21–7.
 – (2011) 'The Right Words at the Right Time'. In *Scandinavian Studies in Rhetoric. Rhetorica Scandinavica 1997–2010*, edited by Jens E. Kjeldsen and Jan Grue, 240–9. Ödåkra: Retorikförlaget.
Bitzer, Lloyd F. (1968) 'The Rhetorical Situation'. *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1: 1–14.
 – (1980) 'Functional Communication: A Situational Perspective'. In *Rhetoric in transition: Studies in the Nature and Uses of Rhetoric*, edited by Eugene E. White, 21–38. Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press.
Jamieson, Kathleen H. (1973) 'Generic Constraints and the Rhetorical Situation'. *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 6, 3: 162–70.
Kelly, Ashley R., Meagan K. Autry, and Brad Mehlenbacher. (2014) 'Considering *Chronos* and *Kairos* in Digital Media Rhetorics'. In *Digital Rhetoric and Global Literacies. Communication Modes and Digital Practices in the Networked World*, edited by Gustav Verhulsdonck and Marohang Limbu, 227–47. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
Kinneavy, James L. (1986) '*Kairos*: A Neglected Concept in Classical Rhetoric'. In *Rhetoric and Praxis: The Contribution of Classical Rhetoric to Practical Reasoning*, edited by Jean D. Moss, 79–105. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
 – (2002) 'Kairos in Classical and Modern Rhetorical Theory'. In *Rhetoric and Praxis: The Contribution of classical rhetoric to practical reasoning*, edited by Jean D. Moss, 58–76. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
Kjeldsen, Jens E. (2008a) 'Retoriske Omstændigheder [Rhetorical Circumstances]'. *Rhetorica Scandinavica* 48: 42–63.
 – (2008b) 'Mediated Publics and Rhetorical Fragmentation'. In *Democracy, Journalism and Technology: New Developments in an Enlarged Europe*, edited by Nico Carpentier, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Kaarle Nordenstreng, Maren Hartmann, Peeter Vihalemm, Bart Cammaerts, Hannu Nieminen, and Tobias Olsson, 115–28. Tartu: Tartu University Press.
Miller, Carolyn. (1992) 'Kairos in the Rhetoric of Science'. In *A Rhetoric of Doing. Essays on Written Discourse in Honor of James L. Kinneavy*, edited by Stephen P. Witte, Neil Nakadate, and Roger D. Cherry, 310–27. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
 – (1994) 'Opportunity, Opportunism, and Progress: *Kairos* in the Rhetoric of Technology'. *Argumentation* 8, 1: 81–96.
Muir, John V., ed. (2001) *Alcidamas. The Works and Fragments*. London: Duckworth/Bristol Classical Press.
Onians, Richard B. (1973) *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate*. New York: Arno.
Scott, Blake. (2006) 'Kairos as Indeterminate Risk Management. The Pharmaceutical Industry's Response to Bioterrorism'. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92, 2: 115–43.
Sheridan, David M., Anthony J. Michel, and Jim Ridolfo. (2009) '*Kairos* and New Media: Toward a Theory and Practice of Visual Activism'. *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture* 6, 2: Accessed April 29, 2014: http://www.enculturation.net/6.2/sheridan-michel-ridolfo.
Sipiora, Phillip. (2002) 'Introduction. The Ancient Concept of *Kairos*'. In *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis*, edited by Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin, 1–22. New York: State University Press.

Smith, John E. (1969) 'Time, Times, and the 'Right Time': *Chronos* and *Kairos*'. *The Monist* 53, 1: 1–13.

– (1986) 'Time and Qualitative Time', *The Review of Metaphysics* 40, 1: 3–16.

Stephenson, Hunter. (2009) '(Re)Claiming the Ground: Image Events, *Kairos*, and Discourse'. *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture* 6, 2: Accessed April 29, 2014: http://enculturation.gmu.edu/6.2/stephenson.

Vatz, Richard. (1973) 'The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation'. *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 6, 3: 154–61.

Virilio, Paul. (2006) *Speed and Politics*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).