

*The Right Moment*  
*A Symposium on Kairotic Energies*

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Barbara Baert  
in collaboration with  
the Francqui Foundation

Barbara Baert

## The Right Moment: A Symposium on Kairotic Energies

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# *The Right Moment*

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An Introductory Speech by

Barbara Baert





*Dear rector,*  
*Dear vice-rector,*  
*Dear excellencies,*  
*Dear distinguished guests,*  
*Dear colleagues,*  
*Dear friends,*

This is a symposium that celebrates time and embraces that time in the moment. It is therefore a symposium that might desire to grasp the impossible. Augustine already asked himself: "What exactly is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If someone asks me I cannot tell."

Time: known but impossible to explain. A subject between intuition and science. Yes, time and moments of time escape our horizon, but they are deeply rooted in our sensory environment and emotional experiences.

Each of us has already experienced this mysterious sense of a moment of moments. A trembling conviction that the 'now' has come, that the perfect and unique occasion is approaching: stretch out one's arm and it can be grasped. Each of us will also remember a particular opportunity in life that slipped away, the disappointment that entailed, the sorrow for something never to be, something that has now receded into cosmic darkness.

The ancient Greeks had a special name for the concept of the joy as well as the sorrow of an occasion that suddenly presents itself, but just as swiftly disappears: *Kairos*.

Homer's *Iliad* teaches us that the Greek word *kairós* meant a vulnerable part of the body. In this sense the word is closely related to the Homeric *kairion*: the part of the body that can most effectively be "hit", the spot where "life is in greatest danger" (*Ilias* 8.48): the point at which Hector's stone hits Teukros: "the collarbone that is the boundary between neck and chest" (*Ilias* 8.326).

*Kairós* is the right place, the "target". Linguistic studies show that this oldest meaning is part of a complex of related words in Greek, including: *kèr*: death; *keraizein*: to plunder, to slaughter; *kèr*: heart; *kèrainein*: to be worried or frightened; *keiein*: to cleave; *keirein*: to cut. All these words contain a kernel meaning to separate or divide, an act of splitting in order to kill sacrificially.

*Kairos* makes an opening, an opening that symbolises 'opportunity', like the loophole or the flight forwards. So secondly, we can notice the relationship with the word *kairos* in the terminology of weaving, or the technical term for the shed bar. In weaving, the shed is the temporary separation between upper and lower warp yarns through which the weft is woven. The shed is created to make it easy to interlace the weft into the warp and thus create woven fabric. The connection between an opening, and thus the opportunity to create, and humankind's fate has remained

archetypically connected with the act of weaving.

Thirdly, *Kairós*, still following Homer, can refer to a junction in time. An intersection so perfect that it provides the only possible “occasion”. The juncture is “fit” for intervention, the moment is marked; the time is ripe.

In Sophocles’ *Electra*, the protagonist, Orestes, returns from Athens to avenge his father’s death upon Aegisthus and his own mother Clytemnestra. This is the moment of intersection: time is so condensed that *Kairos* dictates the pace. Orestes says: “There is no room for a moment’s delay. This is the moment (*Kairos* is here!) and determines my deeds” (75-76). *Kairos* is performative; we summon him. A vocal usage, moreover, that continues to live on in the Greek-Byzantine liturgy.

*Kairos* is the qualitative aspect of time (a time more right than any other), while Chronos is a quantitative amount of time (long or short). Something is *kairos* when the suitable moment arrives: for example, harvesting grain. This can also be seen through its use in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew term מֵאוֹד *me’od*.

Something is *kairos* if the right measure has been achieved, for example the fermentation of wine. Something is *kairos* when the time is ripe for intervention. The word *kairos* is therefore often found in Greek medical texts: recognising the crisis, responding appropriately, and treating the disease.

Something is *kairos* if the time is fulfilled. This is apparent from a biblical passage. In Mark chapter 1, verse 15, Jesus proclaims: “The time is accomplished, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent, and believe in the gospel!” Christ has come, incarnated, to heal our Chronos time, by making it His time of opportunity for our salvation in Him (*kairos*).

*Kairos* also plays a role in rhetoric, the art of speaking. When speaking we need to identify the right arc of tension and deploy our words accordingly. *Kairos* appears where eloquence and ethics meet. Thus can the speaker embrace truth.

To recap. Firstly, in Homer, the word *Kairos* refers to a point on the body, it went on to become a measure of the right moment in time, and from there a quality of rhetoric. But *Kairos* was also personified as a divinity. In hymns he is described as a young man of pleasant aspect, a son of Zeus. *Kairos*, just like Hermes, has winged feet, referring to the speed with which he travels down the timeline, and to the quickness with which we have to seize him.

There is an epigram by Posidippus of Pella from the mid-third century BC, that describes a lost sculpture of *Kairos* made by the renowned artist Lysippos. In part, the epigram runs: “Why does your hair fall over your face? Ah! To be seized by those I pass.”

The sculpture in Turin’s Museo di Antichità is regarded as a copy of Lyssipos’ lost sculpture.



Let us take a closer look at this artwork in Turin.

First there is the position. Authors have interpreted this as a particular snapshot between the god's descent from the air and his capacity to take flight again at any moment. The juncture at which *Kairos* is suddenly within reach.

With virtuosity the moment is captured that the Greeks referred to with the concept of *erèmia* (ἐρημία): the 'pregnant pause' between two successive moments. The pregnant pause is here captured in one sculpture; frozen as an artistic manifesto of what sculpture can do, and by extension of what *Kairos*, as the god of the occasion, can contribute to the definition of the arts.



Kairos, after Lyssipos, ca. 350-330 BC  
Museo di Antichità, Turin

The wings on his feet are borrowed from Hermes. The wings on his back, *Kairos* has borrowed from air creatures such as Psychè.

The scales reference balance, finding the right measure. This equilibrium is precarious, literally balancing on a razor's edge.

Finally, *Kairos* has a unique and characteristic hairstyle: a flowing forelock and a bald crown. *Kairos* has to be grabbed by the hair! This has given rise to expressions such as “seize occasion by the forelock”, which is now obsolete in English but survives in several other languages: *tener la fortuna pel ciuffo* in Italian, for example, or in Dutch *de gelegenheid bij de haren grijpen*. The seizing of *Kairos*' hair is not unlike the children on a merry-go-round, arms extended to try to catch the ring, or hoop, or in many parts of Europe the tassel or tuft that will entitle them to a free ride - a tassel that has many different names in dialects where it is in use (in Flemish alone giving *flosj*, *tros*, *struffel*, and more). In some parts, both the language and popular customs have retained a relationship between a tuft of hair and a golden opportunity.

How else could it be? *Kairos* has outlasted time. Winged feet against tired old Chronos. Now and then he hides between the folds of our cultural history. Then he pops up again, his hair blowing in the wind. *Kairos* smiles at the timeline. There, he's gone again. He's not to blame. We were too slow. And what should we call this winged creature?

This impetuous snapshot that defies our imagination and our knowledge?

He who is time, but also falls out of time.

Research into the *Nachleben* or on-going recurrence of the *Kairos* figure in Western ideas and art history - precisely the subject of our project with a Phd and a postdoc funded by the KU Leuven - is indeed quite complicated, because the concept has been subject to translations into Latin and various vernaculars. In the Bible, the concept of *Kairos* is translated as either *tempus*, or as *Occasio* and *Fortuna* (the latter which changed the sex).

The *Carmina Burana* (11th-12th century), for example, sings of *Fortuna*: *Verum est quod legitur, fronte capillata, sed plerumque sequitur Occasio calvata* ("It is written in truth that she has a fine head of hair on the front, but, when it comes to seizing an opportunity, the back of her head is bald").

The author of the *Carmina* imagines the classic *Kairos* with the back of the head bald, but sings of a female *Fortuna*.

This led to hybrid iconographic branches such as the grisaille that features *Occasio* and *Poenitentia* (ca. 1490-1510), currently located at the Museo della Città nel Palazzo di San Sebastiano in Mantua, from the studio of Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506) and commissioned in the context of the Gonzaga family.

A female figure with hair on her forehead and a bald crown moves with winged feet on top of a globe. Her clothing billows dynamically in the wind. She is a contrast to the woman with the headgear who has been placed on a rectangular pedestal. She is keeping a young man from chasing the winged woman. This is *Constantia*. The young man stretches out his arms in vain to the winged, almost mocking *Fortuna*... And she's gone again...



Scuola di Mantegna, Occasio e Poenitentia, ca. 1490-1510.  
Museo della Città nel Palazzo di San Sebastiano, Mantua.

The source for this iconography lay in an epigram by the ancient author Ausonius, in which he evokes a dialogue between opportunity (occasion) and regret (poenitentia, metanoia). *Metanoia*, is described by Plutarch (46-120), in his *Moralia*, as the deep emotional pain of a missed opportunity. Such pain is like the stabbing of an ulcer that just won't heal, he writes.

The term is also connected to the Jewish teshuva or the Old Testament term *shubh* (turning point, *Wendepunkt*) and the Latin *Poenitentia* (regret). In Christianity, *metanoia* is interpreted more positively, and *Poenitentia* is closely connected to personal conversion based on insight (such as repenting after remorse). It is a constructive and transforming moment in time that brings forth a new direction in life.

During Humanism indeed, the idea of grasping or loosing occasion was popular in moral and political tractates. In his *Il principe* (1513), Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) describes how a good ruler recognizes the right moment, and seizes it. But even so, the good ruler needs to learn from his missed chances too!

People assume that the *Kairos* painted by Girolamo da Carpi (1501-1556) for Ercole II d'Este (1508-1559), the duke of Ferrara, came from this particular Machiavellian school of thought, since both men were acquainted.

The painting portrays what *Il principe* states: political influence should be 'earned' with *Kairos'* virtue. This *virtù* is found in the alertness to recognise the right moment and then to turn it into political advantage for the community, without losing the moral insights of *poenitentia*.



Girolamo da Carpi (1501-1556), *Kairos and Penance*, 1541.  
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden

Back to Mantua. The fact that the *Occasio* affresco was done in grisaille gives the iconography even more meaning. The grisaille preserves the pact with the bronze *Kairos* prototype. But the grisaille technique is also a metaphor: a visual state that has not yet been reached by colour. Grisaille specifically wishes to evoke an optical in-between mode, as a metaphor for a pregnant image: waiting to burst out in colour.

This sleeping mode of the grisaille-technique was compared with the chrysalis or cocoon, in which the butterfly waits to emerge. In the poems and songs of Pindar (ca. 522-443 BC), *Kairos* appears in the guise of a butterfly. We see also a butterfly on *Kairos*' hand on the onyx ring from the British Museum.

The idea of transitions, combined with the fleetingness of the moment, connects the occasion with the whimsical *pyschè*/ butterfly.

Look! *Kairos/Occasio* enters the room through an opening, just as the butterfly makes of the capriciousness of a breeze. That is why the whimsical *Kairos*-butterfly is also the symbol of the sudden insight, of the artistic idea, but also of the madness, the mania...

*Kairos* also as the sudden emergence of an idea, of inspiration and creativity in art and literature.



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*An aphasic murmur, a dissipated smell and a vanished fever, a scratch without a scab, the scab came off long ago. I am like the earth beneath the grass, or even deeper down, like the invisible earth beneath the still more sunken earth. That is, I will be time, which has never been seen, and which no one ever can see.*

Javier Marías, *Your Face Tomorrow*

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*Who is she? Where does she come from? Have I encountered her before? I mean one and a half millennia earlier? Does she come from a noble Greek lineage, and did her great-grandmother have an affair with people from Asia Minor, Egypt or Mesopotamia?*

Aby Warburg

\*

*Perhaps it's an attempt by all things to leave their mark, to make it harder for them to be denied or glossed over or forgotten, it's their way of saying "I was here", or "I'm still here, therefore I must have been before", and to prevent others from saying "No, this was never here, never, it neither strode the world nor trod the earth, it did not exist and never happened.*

Javier Marías, *Your Face Tomorrow*



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*Elle m'émouvait.  
Elle me ramenait très loin en arrière.  
Avant.  
Avant que tout commence.  
Avant la vie.*

Paul in the movie *Avant L'Hiver*, Philippe Claudel

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*As the most beautiful butterfly [Seelentierchen] that I ever mounted suddenly escaped through the glass and flew playfully away, upwards into the blue sky. Now I should try to catch her again, but I am not equipped for this kind of powerful movement in place.*

Aby Warburg again

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*Is the Mantuan grisaille not erèmia, a pregnant pause, wrapped in a cocoon, a larva that is about to erupt into colour? Will Occasio not soon shed her skin for a new and multicoloured era, marking the beginning of Bildwissenschaften, blowing over us the inspiration for a new discipline? For: What counts, faced with an image, is not 'what we are talking about'. What counts is the dance itself – of my gaze and my sentences – with the image. It is a question of rhythm. Like a galloping horse uses stretches of ground; it is not the ground, it is the gallop [of Kairos] that counts.*

Georges Didi-Huberman, *Glimpses*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

What can *Kairos* teach us today, as scholars? What is a moment in time? Augustine compares moment/momentum with 'the blow of a trembling glance'. The blink of an eye. The blink of an eye is not a random stretch of time. Moment, momentum is actually derived from movement, *movere!* Moments are not static, but dynamic transitions. Time is not homogeneous; some moments are more important and some are less important, or perhaps: time isn't usually there; it is only there in the blink of an eye, during the occasion. That which happens in this moment, which comes to a halt, is so profound that it is indescribable. An abyss, which defines the totality of life, becomes visible. Moments of time have the power of an epiphany.

These epiphanies can also be very subtle, like the charged silence between two people, the pause between two musical notes, the sudden flowering of a blush. Opportunity lies in the fleetingness of a sigh, in the tremor of a breeze, in the unexpected shifting of a lock of hair. There in the void of the almost, as David Greenberg once called it - something rises up, something with wings, something that glistens with potential.

A diachronicity is disturbed: a surface that folds, water that ripples, paper that rips. The interruption, the disruption, the tilting, makes a new opening possible. According to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) the opening of *Kairós* gives entry to the unconscious mind. This is something that

quantitative Chronos lacks. *Kairos* has what it takes. He: once the join of collarbone and neck... The flesh severs. The memory of time creeps from the wound, encounters the present and impregnates the future. Listen, he has brought the song of Orpheus, but Echo's voice is already dying away on the sharpened razor.

Dear speakers,

The concept for this symposium was announced as follows.

“The Right Moment. A Symposium on Kairotic Energies wants to both embrace an interdisciplinary look at *kairós* as cultural-historical phenomenon and concept, as well as celebrate the twists and turns, the amazement and grief that comes with the creative thought process of our trade. Hence, this symposium is a celebration of science, emotion and time.”

The idea of *kairotic energies* is a multiply layered paradigm, which stretches out over different interdisciplinary fields and epistemologies that this symposium aspires to include: the Human Sciences combining Anthropology, the History of Religion, Theology and, in a certain manner, even Psychoanalysis. This gaze upon the depth and width touches the capacity of the Human Sciences to open themselves up and to touch upon a transdisciplinary and integrated methodology. Or as James Elkins once wrote: “It’s a sign of health if art history can address large-scale questions.”

The potential of the discipline to spread out and to collaborate; the freedom to keep the subject matter sometimes close, but to expand it over its complete breadth, is one of the most delightful choreographies that the Human Sciences can offer us. Exactly these dynamics of open and closed, of landscape and focus, of archetype and detail - and everything in between: the thinking, the seeking, the testing, the hesitating, the creative solutions, yes, the failing, and then the beginning again from the start... - all these form the right *ampleur* we might embrace these two days as kairotic energies indeed.

I am deeply grateful to you, dear speakers, for agreeing to be here. You have travelled to Brussels from Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Israel, Romania, The Netherlands, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. Among you are theologians, historians of religion, art historians, philosophers, historians of Islam, and anthropologists. Many of you are key influencers on the importance of the Humanities not only from a methodological point of view, but also in terms of peace process work, ecology, and the relationship between Eastern and Western civilizations.

But you too, dear personal guests in the room, are warmly welcome.

The topics will cover different fields, periods and disciplines. I am the one responsible for that.

It was I who asked our speakers to stay close to their own expertise and their passions. The sessions, and their enthusiastic respondents, will, among other things, probe the role of the snapshot of the glance in the visual arts (the blink of an eye), the manic flash of genius. Will include important researchers into *Kairos/Fortuna* in the Arts, such as Aby Warburg. Will treat key moments of change in sacred history and their Christian iconography. We will learn about the concept of *kairos* in Sanskrit, but also about the application of *kairos* in the architecture and the landscape of Israel and Palestine.

The sessions will also plumb the urgency of the now-moment, our self-development and social responsibility to connect when faced with war, climate change and gender issues. And yes, now and then these speakers and respondents might also give us an intimate glimpse of their own personal *Kairos*, their own doorway to the inner self.

We will, appropriately, celebrate this Francqui Symposium also with a visual artist who will draw snapshots of the symposium and the speakers. With an embroiderer who will experiment on the spot with *Kairos*' tuft or tassel. And with our writer in residence, known for his mercilessly sharp wit and boundless *kairotic energy*, who will be given time and space to work on a literary impression of this symposium.

Avec les mots de Georges Perec:

*Simplement quelque chose s'est ouvert et s'ouvre : la bouche pour parler, le stylo pour écrire: quelque chose s'est déplacé, quelque chose se déplace et se trace, la ligne sinueuse de l'encre sur le papier, quelque chose de plein et de délié.*

Dear colleagues, let us now officially open the symposium and immediately set the tone with a fundamental debate: the tension between free will and determinism, as expressed by the Hungarian Sandor Marai in his novel *Embers*.

“One can also shape what happens to one. One shapes it, summons it, takes hold of the inevitable. It's the human condition. A man acts, even when he knows from the very onset that his act will be fatal. He and his fate are inseparable, they have a pact with each other that molds them both. It is not true that fate slips silently into our lives. It steps in through the door that we have opened, and we invite it to enter. No one is strong enough or cunning enough to avert by word or deed the misfortune that is rooted in the iron laws of his character and his life.”

**Dank u. Merci Beaucoup.**

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*Le kairos = un élément, un temps énergétique : le moment en soi en tant qu'il produit quelque chose, un changement: c'est une force → kairos non tactique (non pour piéger l'autre mais intériorisé).*

Roland Barthes, *Le Neutre*

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