

# Adequate Rhetorical Delivery when Staging Premodernity: A Combination of Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches

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To 'stage premodernity' in an adequate manner, based on a thorough interpretation – both of the artistic artefact and of its context – implies a consideration of *actio*: rhetorical delivery. How do we approach voice and gesture when working with the performing arts of the eighteenth century?

An obvious historical method consists in examining rhetorical manuals of the period and learn from their illustrations, explanations, and practical advice, and then try to transfer and transform this historical knowledge with a view to contemporary performances. We may define this as a *synchronic* approach that leads to specific insights into the eighteenth century and the reception of rhetoric of the period.

I consider the synchronic approach both necessary and constructive: it is a way of becoming familiar both with the rhetoric and with the aesthetics of a historical period. However, I would argue that the synchronic approach must be combined with a *diachronic* approach, which introduces a broader and longer-lasting perspective on both rhetorical delivery and its impact on aesthetic performance. Classical rhetoric includes a theoretical concept that might help us along when framing this diachronic approach: *kairós*.

*Kairós* is often defined as 'timing' or as 'saying or doing something that fits the exact time, the concrete occasion, and the specific audience'. The concept therefore points towards the fact that rhetoric is deeply rooted in the situation, and, moreover, that the situation is the speaker's greatest resource when choosing what to say or do. Both words and actions may embody *kairós* – if they reflect the demands and potentials of the situation.

The concept *kairós* is rooted in sophistic thinking and is primarily connected with Isocrates (436-c338 BC), the heir of the sophists. The concept was central both to his *filosofia* and to the ideals of his school, which was founded around 390 on the outskirts of Athens. The combination of serious topics and stylistic training was aimed at developing the personalities of the pupils as well as their sense of the individual rhetorical situations: *kairós*. In the writings of Isocrates *kairós* translates as 'time' or 'circumstances' in some passages, and as 'situation' or 'occasion' in others. It is used both in a broad, external sense, and in a narrow, internal sense.

Broadly defined, the concept of *kairós* concerns the ontology of rhetoric, its existence in the world: rhetoric is capable of creating situations and is connected with the ancient Greek concept of *doxa* (opinion, judgement) which is embodied in practical reality, as opposed to the concept of *episteme* (truth in a philosophical sense).

More narrowly defined, the concept of *kairós* concerns the concrete rhetorical situation and refers to its determining role when a speaker or a performing artist makes an utterance or performs an action. Thus, the rhetorical delivery of an actor or a singer may express *kairós* if e.g. the gestures are shaped in close interaction with the specific moment, the special occasion, the stage, and the concrete audience.

Professor Øivind Andersen has emphasized the definition of *kairós* used by the sophist Alcidas (died c375 BC).<sup>1</sup> Unlike Isocrates, Alcidas links the concept closely to oral improvisation: the speech needs to be both invented and delivered in the exact moment when the speaker is facing his audience. Only then he will know with certainty what 'the right words and actions' might be. Of course, he has to prepare himself diligently, developing arguments, choosing stylistic figures and gestures, etc., which may underline his points and move the audience – but he must be able to remain open and shape the speech in interaction with the concrete moment.

At our symposium in Stockholm in December 2014, stage director Deda Cristina Colonna used the phrase 'to trust one's instincts' when reflecting on her artistic work and her way of directing early operas. As a rhetorician, I will support this statement: when staging premodernity and unveiling the immanent orality of the period, we must, of course, prepare ourselves by studying and interpreting the era, its specific artistic artefacts, and its rhetoric (including the gestures that might have been used). When transforming one's knowledge of the period into a contemporary staging – i.e. when going from theory to practice – we have to 'trust our instincts', however, and not rely on our synchronic knowledge alone. In this transformation process a diachronic approach to rhetorical delivery may help us keep focusing on the close interaction with the present moment and on *kairotic* communication – which is, in fact, what persuasive rhetors have always done.

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<sup>1</sup> Andersen 1997.

**Further reading:**

Øivind Andersen: *I retorikkens hage*, Universitetsforlaget i Oslo, 1995.

Øivind Andersen: "Rette ord i rette tid. Kairos i klassisk retorik" in *Rhetorica Scandinavica*, No. 4, 1997.

Tormod Eide: *Retorisk leksikon*, Universitetsforlaget i Oslo 1990.

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Charlotte Jørgensen and Lisa Villadsen (eds.): *Retorik. Teori og praksis*, Samfundslitteratur, Copenhagen 2009.