

# ***Time is hope***

By J. J. Hermsen

Selection of the best essays from *Stil de tijd* (Stop the clocks or Time is on our side, 23rd reedition, 70000 copies sold), and *Kairos. A new Engagement*, (8th reedition, 25.000 copies sold) for an international audience.

## *Content*

*Introduction. Chronos & Kairos time*

*Sheltering the Soul. On boredom*

*Time as Hope. The ideas of Ernst Bloch*

*Time, Docta Spes & Education: Hannah Arendt and Ernst Bloch*

*Time as Duration. On Henri Bergson's philosophy of time*

*Kairotic time and Nietzsche's enthusiasme*

*Born again: natality & time (Hannah Arendt)*

*Time Regained. Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf*

*Etruscan Time. Travel journal (1),*

*Greek Time: the Future is Behind You. Travel journal (2)*

*Time & Literature: Thomas Mann*

*Blowing Bubbles in Time. Peter Sloterdijk*

*Timeless and Tragic. The work of Mark Rothko*

*Kairotic time of the soul*

*Time and Brain. Can computers think?*

**J.J. Hermsen (1961) Author of fiction & non-fiction, Arbeiderspers, lives in Amsterdam.**

PHD in Philosophy and Literature (1993) with Julia Kristeva in Paris and Rosi Braidotti in Utrecht.

Last two novels So it's love (2008) and Blindgangers (2012) nominated for both Libris, Opzij and Akoliterature prize; together 50.000 copies sold.

Last two essays Stil de tijd (2009) and Kairos. A New Engagement (2014) both nominated for shortlist Socrates – Best Philosophy Book of the Year prize.

Stil de tijd rewarded with Jan Hanlo Essay prize (2010).

Stil de tijd sold 70.000 copies and Kairos 25.000 so far.

Author speaks fluently german, french and english.

[Author is a much invited speaker on symposia about philosophy, art & society.](#)

**Some press quotes about her work.**

Kairos: 'Briliant essays', Vrij Nederland 2014

Stil de tijd: 'Beautiful and important essays', NRC 2009

So it's love: 'Excellent and intelligent', Financiele Dagblad 2008

Blindgangers: 'Heartbreaking, sharp and moving', De Morgen 2012

**Some documentaries, TV programmes & booktrailers about her work:**

[- Brands met Boeken VPRO TV on Kairos](#)

[- Brands met Boeken VPRO TV over Stil de tijd](#)

[- Stil de tijd part 1](#)

[- Stil de tijd part 2](#)

[- RABO lecture 2015 on Time](#)

[- So it's love , part 2](#)

[- Kairos. Radboud University 2014](#)

[- NTR TV portrait 2013](#)

---

Fragment from *Stil de tijd*:

'Who owns time? This may seem like a simple question. Time is ours, you would think, because everybody gets their brief sojourn in time. How long that is depends on the amount of time granted to you; some are given thirty, others fifty or eighty years. Time ticks away a slice of your life with every second, while also bringing whatever is still in store closer by the minute. Whether you emphasize the ticking away of the available amount of time to an ever-expanding past or the heralding of a future that is slowly coming within reach depends on your character, age and circumstances. Do you yearn for what has been or do you look forward to what is still to come? Is time something like "hope" (Bloch) or "the greatest innovator" (Bacon) or does time open "a relationship with the infinite" (Levinas)? These three philosophical positions say something about our possible approaches to time, but they tell us little about the actual experience of time in everyday life. Over the past 150 years this experience has undergone a fundamental change. So much so, in fact, that we might ask ourselves if we can still regard time as something that is ours.

This difference in time and in the experience of time has been the subject of several essays of mine, which I am rewriting this summer in the French countryside. While the temperature reaches unprecedented heights and time appears to retreat just that little bit further every day, I reread everything that I have written on this complex but fascinating topic. This secluded place is perfect for the job because I have tried to trace another, less common experience of time and to convey the repercussions and richness of this other time. Our hectic lives in modern, Western society gets often in the way of our ability to distinguish between what I call 'clock time', with its universal rules and rigid divisions, and this other time, which flows beneath our clocks so to speak,

calmly and imperturbably, and which appears to touch on a more personal, more internal time.

It's an experience of time difficult to label or pin down because it cannot be expressed in common units such as hours or minutes. It's a time without hours, but only different gradations of light: from the delicate morning light to the intense and blinding blue light of noon and the dusky pastel shades of the evening which are gradually engulfed by the pitch-black darkness of night. That's all there is to it. Day in day out. The sun rises and sets again. This is the cosmic clock that governs life around here. The remarkable thing is that as the day wears on in this seemingly monotonous way, this uninterrupted flow of time is gradually permeated by a profusion of thoughts, fantasies, experiences and memories. Although I do not know what time it is, I do feel that the hour is mine. Instead of being driven by appointments and nervous glances at the clock, I feel more in synch with an internal time.

The law that governs the regime of clock time is the law of economic returns, whereas the dimension in which the other time carries us is that of our inner self, as philosophers like Henri Bergson, Hannah Arendt and Ernst Bloch have argued. The point is not to exchange one time for the other, but to recapture this other time and to restore the balance between the two. "Only when the clock stops does time come to life" is a quote from William Faulkner to which I wholeheartedly subscribe. Enhancing our sensitivity to this "true time" with which we can enrich and broaden our time-bound existence is, in short, what I had in mind when I wrote these essays.

## Fragment from Kairos. A New Engagement.

What are those mysterious moments in which we no longer see death as the end of a chronological line of events, but in which we are ourselves immortal, if only for a moment? In my new book, I call this the 'kairos' moment. In ancient times, Kairos was not only the other, but also the correct and true face of time, and according to Plato was even 'the best that can happen to a person', because this young, muscular and winged god provided an interval or intermezzo within the strict and monotonous time regime of his grandfather, Chronos. During that intermezzo, a person no longer experiences time the chronological line, but rather the past, present and future are balled, rolled or knotted together (Charles Taylor talks about 'kairotic knots') to create a dynamic form of time driven forth by one's own experience and which allows for change and new insights.

From ancient Greek times to Erasmus, who devoted an entire chapter to it in his *Adagia*, Kairos meant the 'interval' into which we fall if we slow down, take a pause, focus our attention or concentrate particularly well on something. Whereas Chronos stands for universal, static and quantitative time, which is necessary in order to place time in a linear relationship, kairos means that subjective, dynamic and qualitative moment which takes into account the specific and permanently changed circumstances, and for this reason can result in the birth of something new. Until the late sixteenth century, kairos continued to fascinate many a philosopher, statesman, theologian, doctor or poet, because kairos was the kind of time that mattered, time that provided opportunities or allowed for breakthroughs. During the Enlightenment, our attention surrounding this non-measurable dimension of time lessened, but after Nietzsche reintroduced it at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it started making a slow but steady comeback, and it also represented for various philosophers, writers, artists and scientists all those fleeting moments of beauty, visibility and energy that can make life so very special.

Focus, rest and careful consideration of arguments and circumstances are the most important conditions for creating a kairotic moment. That means both good timing and taking or making the most of the right opportunity or circumstance, which can present itself as a result of deep concentration. During the kairos interval, we are no longer hounded by a perceived lack of time, nor by any other type of time-related pressure or stress, but we experience a different dimension of time, which, as well as feeling larger, fuller and more pleasant, also conjures up new possibilities.

In the Kairos moment, past, present and future are bound together in the 'fullness of a visionary moment', as Martin Heidegger wrote in his work, *Being and Time* (1928). He also called it *Anfangliche Zeit*, the time that frees up new possibilities for us, because in the kairos moment, a break or caesura with Chronos time occurs, whereby a new start can be set in motion. In the world of science, kairos is sometimes also linked with the principle of serendipity, in other words 'the quality that allows a person to discover something good or new while seeking something else', as Robert Merton wrote in *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity* (1958). It refers to the fortunate and unexpected discovery of something unknown and, what is more, unsought, and which forms the basis for developing a new theory. A necessary condition, however, is that the researchers are given sufficient time, rest and freedom to explore new byways now and then, diverging from the beaten path of established research and perspectives. Chance

and luck play an important part in this respect, but so do intuition, alertness and creativity. What matters is that you remain sufficiently open to unexpected or previously formulated objectives and dare to think beyond prevailing theories, while at the same time being well prepared for that moment should it arise. Or, in the words of Louis Pasteur: 'The ability to be surprised at the "right moment" is the mind's first step towards discovery.'

In his Berkley lectures, Michel Foucault linked Isocrates' kairotic moment with the Greek concept of *parresia*, which means frank, honest and truthful speech. To Foucault, this type of truth-telling, 'le dire vrai', meant that the speaker was not afraid to speak out critically against established opinions and in doing so take a certain level of risk. Instead of interpreting already accepted opinions in order to secure one's own position within an institution, the speaker must find the courage to interpret his or her 'truth', and do so 'at the right moment'.

These essays are partly inspired by the work of the German Jewish philosopher Ernst Bloch, who in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* associated the objective of art, literature, philosophy and education with what he called 'the fulfilled moment'. He found these 'transgressive' moments not only in art, music or philosophy, but also in everyday experiences, such as reflection and daydreaming. According to Bloch, the 'fulfilled moment' is 'time without clock-hands' and 'seizing eternity in the moment', which presents to us 'the shadow of what is yet to come', in other words, that which currently lies hidden within us as a mere possibility.

He felt that art, philosophy and education should be aimed precisely on those kairotic moments of exceptional focus, because it is in those moments that 'the boundlessness of the utopian prospect and the depth of perceived proximity' come together as one. According to Bloch, these are the perfect moments of inspiration because they do not only help transcend what already exists, but also motivate man's inner process of existence. It is at such kairotic moments that we are like horsemen riding to meet ourselves in the deep of the night. The old me, seated firmly in the saddle of established certainties, and the me yet to come, which is merely promise and possibility, gallop towards each other, and out of the subsequent lightning collision comes the new idea or insight that makes the new us. In that 'fulfilled moment', we get a glimpse of the new beginning in something that 'appears but is not yet manifest', something that lights up as a beacon on the horizon of our thoughts and fills us with the hope of something different and better. Bloch's way of thinking focusses entirely on making people aware of the importance of that creative process of 'becoming'. 'Man simply 'is'. But that is not enough. That is indeed the very least.'

It is precisely at times like these when materialism, technology and commercialism dominate the public realm that we should 'learn to hope again', as Bloch puts it, because otherwise we might ignore the most fundamental aspect of humanity, namely that we are not established facts (like objects), but rather beings in the making that are anchored in time. His concept of 'time as hope' can be regarded as constantly reaching for the unreachable, which provides wings for our thoughts and our imagination. A better future is not as far away as we sometimes think it is. New possibilities lie in wait for alert and creative spirits that know how to conjure up the right kind of amazement at the right time.

