

Time Travel and Media Ecology: A Review of Paul Levinson's "The Plot to Save Socrates" (2006)

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Time Travel and Media Ecology: A Review of Paul Levinson's "The Plot to Save Socrates" (2006).

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Time-travel stories are commonly used to explore questions of logic, ethics, philosophy, and social organization. Paul Levinson's "The Plot to Save Socrates" (2006) adds media ecology to this set.

The story unfolds as an investigation into the plan devised by a mysterious inventor and time traveller, who resolves to save Socrates owing to his immense value to humankind. This person enlists other characters in the scheme, whether they are willing participants or not. The main issue, however, is Socrates himself.

As we know from real history, Socrates did not want to be saved. Convicted to death by the newly established democratic court of Athenian citizens for corrupting youth with his teaching, Socrates, presumably, wants to turn his death into a showcase for history. He aims to equate the judgment of his peers with that of the crowd, essentially discrediting democracy as a rule by people without merits. Meanwhile, as both an ethical and historical statement, Socrates' self-sacrifice historically ranks second only to that of Jesus Christ.

The plot of "The Plot" provides the author with unique opportunities to extend Socratic ideas and apply them to various media, historical, and political phenomena. For instance, Socrates contemplates the nature of industrialization when encountering identically produced items, which was impossible in craftsmanship economies. Socrates is also forced to develop his well-known rejection of writing. While observing book volumes in a modern library, he still finds arguments to reject the "dead words" of letters, even though they kept his thoughts alive for millennia.

As a character in the story admits, he feels as if he lives in a Platonic dialog. Levinson, indeed, even dares to write another Socratic dialog. The dialog of Socrates with the mystery time traveller, allegedly lost and recovered, sets up the story itself, giving the participants of the plot guidance and motives. Levinson has his time travellers argue with Socrates in attempts to persuade the philosopher against dying, employing his own logic and ethos. Otherwise, what else could rival the power of Socratic thought? So, the "discovered" dialogue is meant to be self-fulfilling: it triggers the chain of events and kicks off the story itself.

All of this is embedded into an adventurous story, where characters from the past, present, and future travel to different eras and cultures. They live their mundane lives there – talk, eat, fight, love, and die – while trying to bend history without destroying it.