

"Design is, A Metropolis Book"

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Letter to my Son, by Barbara Flanagan

key Themes:

- Future values and ethics:
- Utopian vision
- Design Critique
- Personal tone

Techniques:

- Speculative world-building embedded in an intimate format.
- Subtle satire of late-20th-century consumerism
- Uses a personal lens to discuss societal design decisions.

Dear Nat,

Even though I've known you for 15 years, I know much less about you now than ever.

What I know is this: it's your first year of high school; your voice is deeper, your head higher, and your patience much shorter than last year or the year before. If you would stand straight up you could pass for a grown man. In fact, you'll actually be a grown man in a couple years, and in a couple decades you and your friends will be running the show—ruling the world.

What I know very well, however, is your room. It's a complex space, layered with meaning—and stuff. Like the floor of an Amazon rain forest, it's covered with a dangerous tangle of vines that trips up all intruders: wires, cables, conduits connecting your machines—PC, printer, scanner, synthesizer, keyboard, modem, drum machine, and turntables—plugged into two inadequate outlets. Covering the jungle floor is another layer of organic disorder. Most of your wardrobe lies on the floor, flattened into waves of many plaids, as if a tsunami had beached a whole shipwreck of clothing there along with your sheets. Embedded in that shifting layer is the flotsam of your recent past: vinyl records, CDs, golf balls, shoes. Next to your lava lamp, dishes and snack wrappers also pile up.

I know you love your faraway third-floor retreat and the way it frightens the few grown-ups who dare to make the climb. If you'd let me clean it, for God's sake, I might learn even more about your inner life, along with the electronic realms you visit all over the world—while simultaneously composing electronic computer music, phoning pals, and buying more equipment on E-bay—long after your bedtime. But you decline ("No, Mom, I'll clean it myself").

You'd like your life to be private. And you'd prefer, frankly, that I take all my urgent concern, curiosity, and imagination and use it on someone else. But I'm your mother—and I cannot help but wonder about you, your immediate future, your distant future, and the fire hazard that is your room.

So here's the deal I will make. If you promise to uphold a reasonable level of health and safety up there, I'll agree to try to change my focus. Rather than worry about your current domain, I'll obsess about the place you'll inhabit later—when you grow up and leave the house. Will you be okay out there? Furthermore, I'd like to know: will the world be okay? Instead of redoing your room, I'll invest my meddlesome energy in designing your future. This is what I think life will be like, my son, in the year 2020.

You're 15, which is pretty old in this new country. A lot of it looks pretty much the same as it did when you were 15, but there are a lot of important changes that would be too big, or too small, to notice if you were a tourist. Age is one example.

Twenty years ago plenty of bored young billionaires entered politics after retiring (at 25). They didn't actually run for office themselves, but ran the people they wanted in office. So now, even though the boomer generation, mine, is still alive and kicking, a young and powerful minority has made new rules. The laws favor those under 40.

Another thing you can't notice is the way things don't move so quickly anymore. You'll recall how people used to race around harassing each other by cell phone and Palm Pilot? No more. Good things take a long time. Many time-consuming things are considered prestigious: long vacations preceded by long relaxation periods, foods and drugs absorbed into the skin through permanent body patches; night college (a four-year degree earned in ten years of REM course-editing while you sleep); long careers in long-perspective fields (those with 50-year time frames), including the environmental professions (the ones that manipulate climate over enemy territories).

The invisible changes are big. The USA is now the NAR (the North American Republic). The melting of the polar cap became something of a national security problem, with the flooding and all, so Canada agreed to merge with us supposedly to figure out how to keep their glaciers cold (1). The real reason, of course, was the massive industrialization of Mexico and the insecurity it engendered.

The good news is that energy is free and clean—it's solar at last. The photovoltaic (PV) industry finally figured out how to make cheap, thin PV film that can roof, laminate, or surround almost anything, then convert sunshine into electricity (2). Unfortunately all the equipment that uses that energy is expensive and underperfected. It's taken a long time to trash internal combustion engines and make the switch, especially since the NAR leveled most of its factories long ago. People still own cars—electric ones. But getting travel permission is not all that easy (3). Each citizen is assigned an annual mileage allotment according to what they do for a living and which Village they belong to. The average is 2,000 miles. (Can you believe 12,000 was the pre-allotment average? That's one change you must regret.)

"Harassing"
Ironic commentary
on digital dependence

This is a reflection on the future reorganization of social and political structures, technological slowdown, and ecological weaponization, reflecting the author's criticism of real-life issues through speculative fiction = global dependence, technological anxiety, climate crisis, North American hegemony —

Speculative design

technological vision + asymmetric reality

identifying-
growth,
future responsibility

(objects)
relationship between
personal space and
design identity

Room → reach
Private Universe
→ Inaccessible
space

move to
speculation
future

abstract
personal
growth

15

personal
environment

Design
symbolic
emotional
boundaries

Emotional labor

personal
identity

New York City is really the place you want to be, however. You're just waiting for your sublet permit, the visa that allows artists and craftsmen to stay in Manhattan for a couple of months each year—if their applications are accepted and processed (usually after five years), and if there is space available. Most of the vacancies occur in the high-density servant towers—like dorm buildings for domestic labor (6)—when servants accompany their employers out of the city on long vacations. You've also applied for a San Francisco permit just in case the New York one doesn't come through. But that's even harder to get because those WABI-loving foreign tourists (seeking out the picturesque earthquake ruins of 2005) bribe the entry officials and hog all the permits.

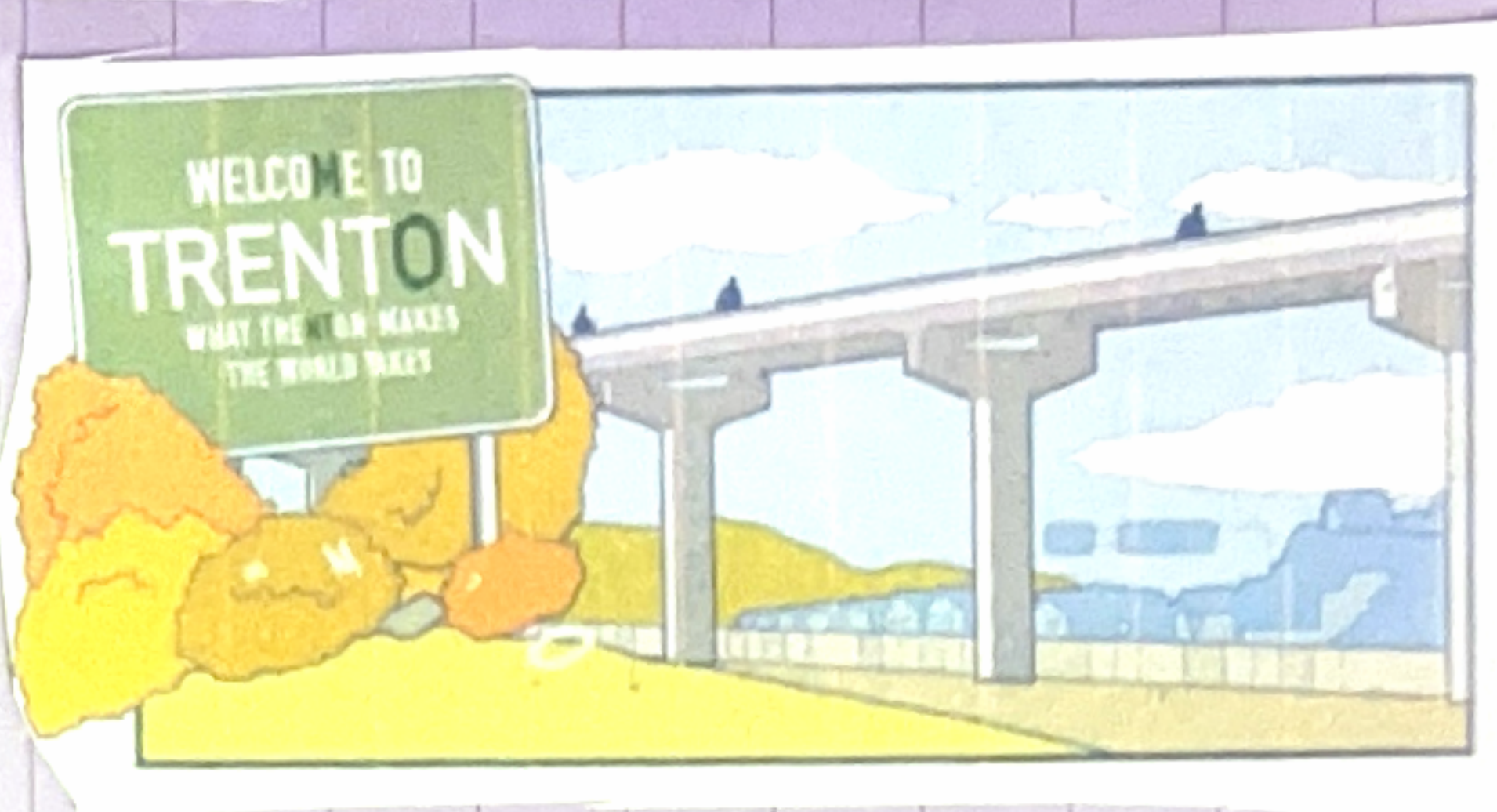
Living in one of those cities will help you advance your real career as a composer. What you compose is SYKE—short for psychological—music; electronic music designed to influence behavior neurologically. The first intimation of SYKE music was Muzak, soothing renditions of popular music piped into public places. Later the French invented "son et lumière" shows that blasted classical music at tourists, as well as corny night lighting on chateaus. Mozart for babies and other fads followed, but the principle—using sensory input to mess with the brain—took a couple of decades to engineer.

SYKE =

= Psychological-Yielded Knowledge Environment (Psychological music)

Muzak
(supermarket background music)

↓
Neural control music



At first SYKE music was controversial especially when it was used with SYKE lighting design, an earlier form of so-called "manipulative environmental design." Critics said it was a diabolical form of subliminal advertising. But now it's ubiquitous. Most people have digital ear appliances embedded in their cartilage anyway, so they can shut off aural reception whenever they walk into a particularly hostile SYKE-filled setting (for example, when police clear city streets at night using music, especially the irritating Curfew Theme, as if it were tear gas.) (7)

concept theme = Neural design/behavior manipulation technology

enters the daily life space.

Sound space control = a new generation of "environmental power"
post-copyright system → composers customize background tracks for home scenes and become "sound craftsmen".

The ear appliances explain why disciplinary SYKE no longer works, at least not in wealthier nations (everyone just tunes it out). Most SYKE is harmless; some is even therapeutic. Unfortunately, some people tune out too much. They get addicted to silence because it's so absorbing—like watching TV with the sound muted—so they have to be committed to silence-rehab clinics to get resocialized.

Famous SYKE composers work like painters did 50 years ago. No royalties—intellectual property laws, like copyrighting, were overturned in 2002—just the promise of big commissions. (8) Patrons order up SYKE compositions just as kings used to commission symphonies. The same sort of patron buys hundreds of highly customized compositions each year—sort of like sound tracks for living—designed to enhance family life, enliven a party, or boost a child's math ability. However, it's the institutional and com-

The combination of space control and sound control reflects the future trend of "multi-sensory design power".

Architecture (Smart Skin) made all of this possible. In the beginning the membrane was like flimsy bubble wrap filled with gases that you'd tack around the inside of a structure as if you were upholstering it. Current running through the gases would make the room glow. (In 2003 its elderly inventor called the product "tents" made out of material that "merged the principles of "neon lights and electric blankets." No one cared.) (9)

The breakthrough was wiring the membrane for sound. At that point the substance glowed while it vibrated: marketable at last, but not indispensable. Later, biotech scientists figured out how to make the wrapping material more like living skin—breathing, exuding, and receiving stimuli. First they produced a membrane with a more intricate and responsive cellular structure. Next they replaced the gases with advanced fiber optics. Some years later they developed a way to make the Skin change temperature to heat or cool a space while emanating humidity, ventilation, and chemical mood atomizing (a mind-altering mist like ionized ocean breezes, only more potent). Different cellular layers perform different tasks. The whole system uses an astounding amount of electricity. And without PV tech, it wouldn't have flown.

Anyway, demand skyrocketed and prices lowered, until Skin was not much costlier than historic Sheetrock in pre-migration days. To keep one step ahead of China (since Skin is just about the last NAR product manufactured in-continent), the company kept developing Skin until it became much smarter than the original.

The real coup was rendering the cells self-sufficient so that each did its own "thinking," and could receive and transmit information individually. At that point it wasn't difficult to get the Skin to receive pixilated images from broadcast

Smart Skin:

Smart skin is a biomimetic membrane structure that has the ability to emit light, make sounds, regulate temperature, breathe, and absorb stimuli.

It was originally inspired by "bubble film + electric current" and eventually developed into a "building material that can mimic the functions of skin" through bioengineering technology.

Smart skin is implanted with a micro-cell structure that can sense airflow, humidity, light, temperature, and even human emotional responses.



- Responsive architecture
- Ambient computing + mood control
- Skin as interface.



Table 1. Core Structure: From "Problem Solving" Paradigm → "Social Imagination" Paradigm

Design Dimension	Old Paradigm (20th Century Design Logic)	New Paradigm (Speculative Design Logic)
Design Purpose	Solving problems, proposing solutions	Stimulating debate, igniting imagination, questioning reality
Realization Mode	Reality is unified, optimized	Reality is plural, questioned
Success Criteria	Usability, functionality, commercial value	Value shift, social intervention, knowledge transformation
Research Methods	User research, data-driven	What-if, storytelling, cultural critique
Designer Role	Problem-solving expert	Mediator of imagination, facilitator of public discourse

Table 2. Paradigm Shift Embodied in Two Articles

Dimension	Old Paradigm	New Paradigm
Housing View	Housing as asset/property identity	Housing as shared, lightweight, decentralized
Energy View	Consumption-driven (use fossil fuels, electricity)	Regenerative & distributed energy sources (e.g., solar sharing)
Consumption View	Owning goods, fast consumption	From ownership to access, minimalism, reuse/sharing economy
Education View	Exam-driven, knowledge input focused	Imagination, experience-based, narrative/local context learning
Media View	Centralized media control	Personal narration, independent publishing (e.g., SYKE)

"Chapter One = Beyond Radical Design"

Key Themes:

- Speculative design defined: Unlike design for solving existing problems, speculative design explores possible, plausible, and preferable futures.
- Design as critique
- Cultural influence.
- Cones of future:
probable → plausible → possible → preferable

Dreams are powerful. They are repositories of our desire. They animate the entertainment industry and drive consumption. They can blind people to reality and provide cover for political horror. But they can also inspire us to imagine that things could be radically different than they are today, and then believe we can progress toward that imaginary world.¹

It is hard to say what today's dreams are; it seems they have been downgraded to hopes—hope that we will not allow ourselves to become extinct, hope that we can feed the starving, hope that there will be room for us all on this tiny planet. There are no more visions. We don't know how to fix the planet and ensure our survival. We are just hopeful.

Inspiration for design:

Application dimension
Design motivation

Project concept

Inspirational content,
Shift from "solving problems" to
"creating visions"

not have to "solve"
"rename problems"

As Fredric Jameson famously remarked, it is now easier for us to imagine the end of the world than an alternative to capitalism. Yet alternatives are exactly what we need. We need to dream new dreams for the twenty-first century as those of the twentieth century rapidly fade. But what role can design play?

When people think of design, most believe it is about problem solving. Even the more expressive forms of design are about solving aesthetic problems. Faced with huge challenges such as overpopulation, water shortages, and climate change, designers feel an overpowering urge to work together to fix them, as though they can be broken down, quantified, and solved. Design's inherent optimism leaves no alternative but it is becoming clear that many of the challenges we face today are unfixable and that the only way to overcome them is by changing our values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. Although essential most of the time, design's inbuilt optimism can greatly complicate things, first, as a form of denial that the problems we face are more serious than they appear, and second, by channeling energy and resources into fiddling with the world out there rather than the ideas and attitudes inside our heads that shape the world out there.

Rather than giving up altogether, though, there are other possibilities for design: one is to use design as a means of speculating how things could be—speculative design. This form of design thrives on imagination and aims to open up new perspectives on what are sometimes called wicked problems, to create spaces for discussion and debate about alternative ways of being, and to inspire and encourage people's imaginations to flow freely. Design speculations can act as a catalyst for collectively redefining our relationship to reality.

Dream vs Hope

Crisis vs Imagination

most current designs
(UI; products; architecture) are
implicitly optimistic that "as long
as the design is reasonable, the
world will be better."

↓ <But>

This may delay us from questioning
fundamental issues (such as platform
hegemony, data exploitation, and
consumer culture).

< PPPPcone >

= /Paradigm Shift/

① The first cone was the probable. This is where most designers operate. It describes what is likely to happen unless there is some extreme upheaval such as a financial crash, eco disaster, or war. Most design methods, processes, tools, acknowledged good practice, and even design education are oriented toward this space. (How designs are evaluated is also closely linked to a thorough understanding of probable futures.) although it is rarely expressed in those terms.

1. conventional product

2. service design.

The current market-leading design logic

(safe ; efficient ; predictable.)

① probable → like old paradigm
Significance in design practice:

② The next cone describes plausible futures. This is the space of scenario planning and foresight, the space of what could happen. In the 1970s companies such as Royal Dutch Shell developed techniques for modelling alternative near-future global situations to ensure that they would survive through a number of large-scale, global, economic, or political shifts. The space of plausible futures is not about prediction but exploring alternative economic and political futures to ensure an organization will be prepared for and thrive in a number of different futures.

② Plausible → a tentative transition to a new direction.
Significance in design -- :

City vision ; technology blueprint
(design research ; trend modeling)

③ The next cone is the possible. The skill here is making links between today's world and the suggested one. Michio Kaku's book *Physics of the Impossible* sets out three classes of impossibility, and even in the third, the most extreme—things that are not possible according to our current understanding of science—there are only two, perpetual motion and precognition, which, based on our current understanding of science, are impossible. All other changes—political, social, economic, and cultural—are not impossible but it can be difficult to imagine how we would get from here to there. In the scenarios we develop we believe, first, they should be scientifically possible, and second, there should be a path from where we are today to where we are in the scenario. A believable series of events that led to the new situation is necessary, even if entirely fictional. This allows viewers to relate the scenario to their own world and to use it as an aid for critical reflection. This is the space of speculative culture—writing, cinema, science fiction, social fiction, and so on. Although speculative, experts are often consulted when building these scenarios, as David Kirby points out in a fascinating chapter about distinctions between what he calls speculative scenarios and fantastic science in his book *Lab Coats in Hollywood*; the role of the expert is often, not to prevent the impossible but to make it acceptable.⁵

Beyond this lies the zone of fantasy, an area we have little interest in. Fantasy exists in its own world, with very few if any links to the world we live in. It is of course valuable, especially as a form of entertainment, but for us, it is too removed from how the world is. This is the space of fairy tales, goblins, superheroes, and space opera.

③ possible → Enter the speculative imagination.
Sci-fiction, extreme user system
(experimental design ; narrative UX)

④ Preferable → NEW Paradigm
value-oriented design ; participatory systems ; social vision co-constitution
(design for debate)

④ A final cone intersects the probable and plausible. This is the cone of preferable futures. Of course the idea of preferable is not so straightforward; what does preferable mean, for whom, and who decides? Currently, it is determined by government and industry, and although we play a role as consumers and voters, it is a limited one. In *Imaginary Futures*, Richard Barbrook explores futures as tools designed for organizing and

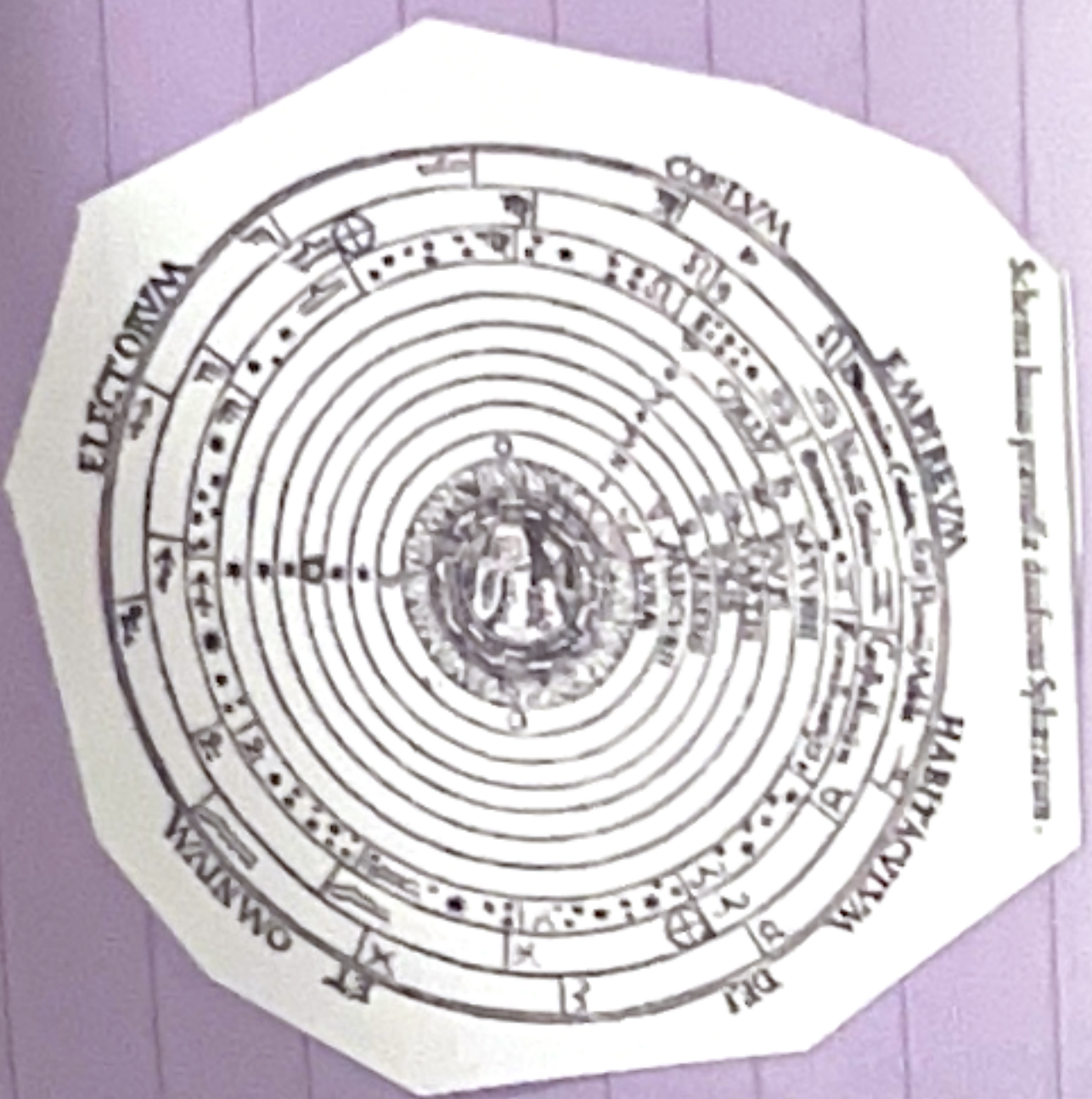
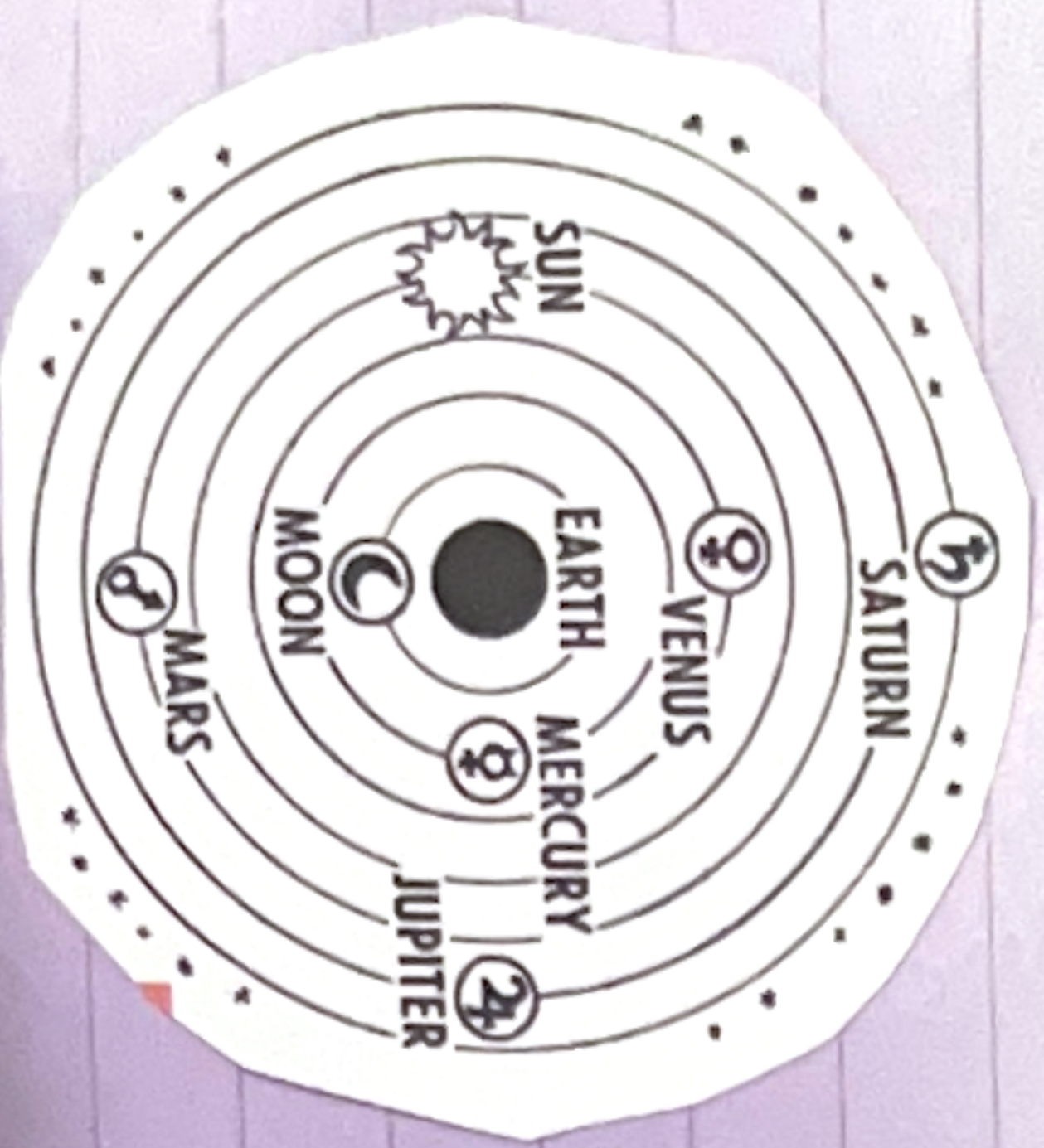
"workshop"

① Paradigm / Paradigm Shift

Paradigm:

a frame of reference, a set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality.

Paradigm shift:
a fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions.



1. Find Themes

- Talk to your partner about your design research.
- Look for patterns, surprises, or recurring problems.
- Use sticky notes, mind maps, photos, or quick sketches.
- Example: If your goal is reducing food waste, maybe a theme is "labelling."

2. Insights

- Turn themes into short, clear insight statements.
- It's about what is, not what could be — no solutions yet.
- Think of it like: "Food gets wasted because people store it at the wrong temperature."
- Good insight = deep understanding of a problem.

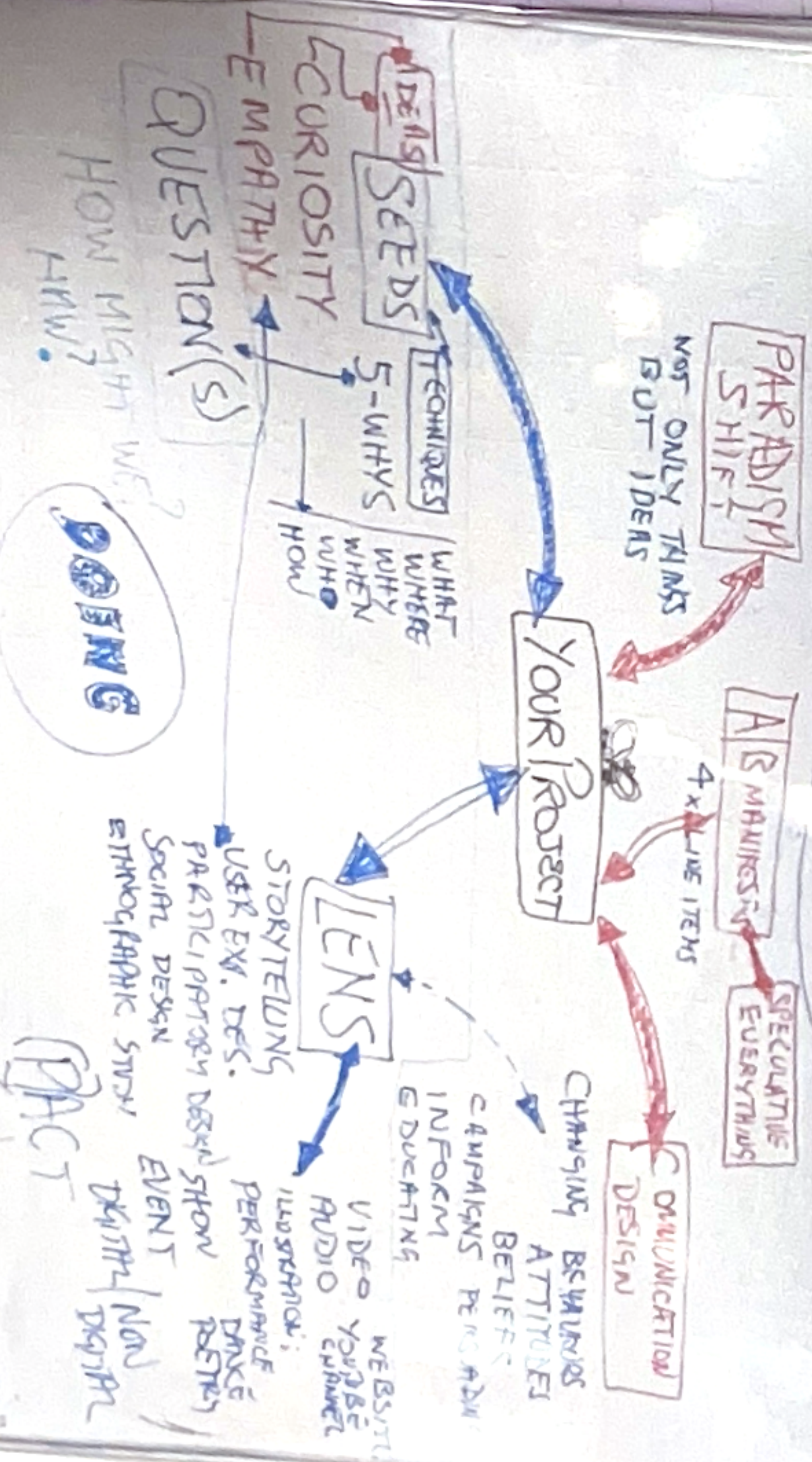
3. POV (Point of View)

- Use the format:
[A user] needs [a need] because [an insight]
- It helps you frame your challenge clearly, from a human-centered perspective.
- Example: "A consumer needs to know where in the fridge to store food because proper temperature keeps it fresh longer."

4. HMW (How Might We) Questions

- Start asking: "How might we..." to turn your POV into creative challenges.
- Come up with a few versions for each POV.
- Example:
How might we create fun, clear food packaging that teaches people where to store it?

INFLUENCES

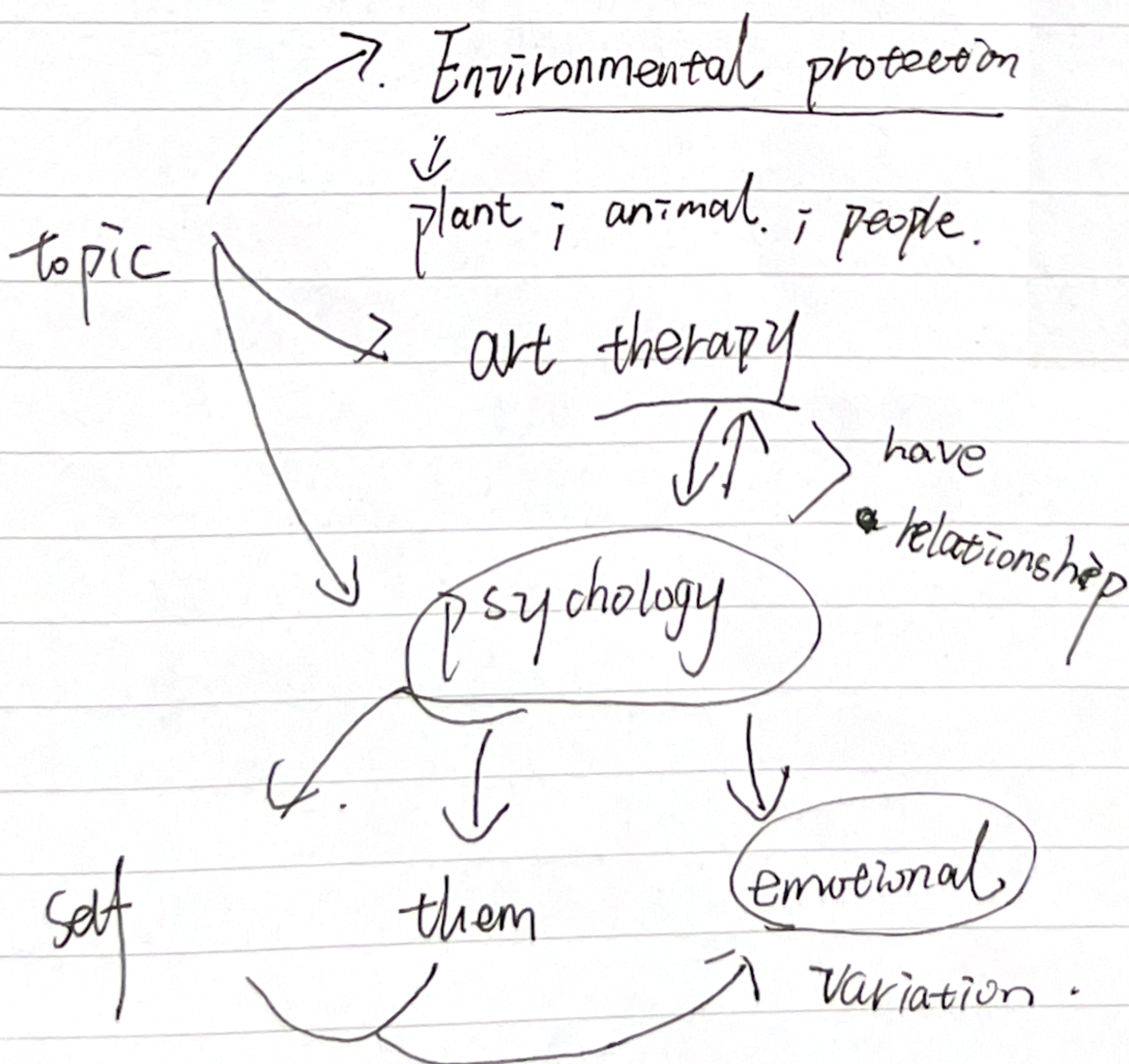


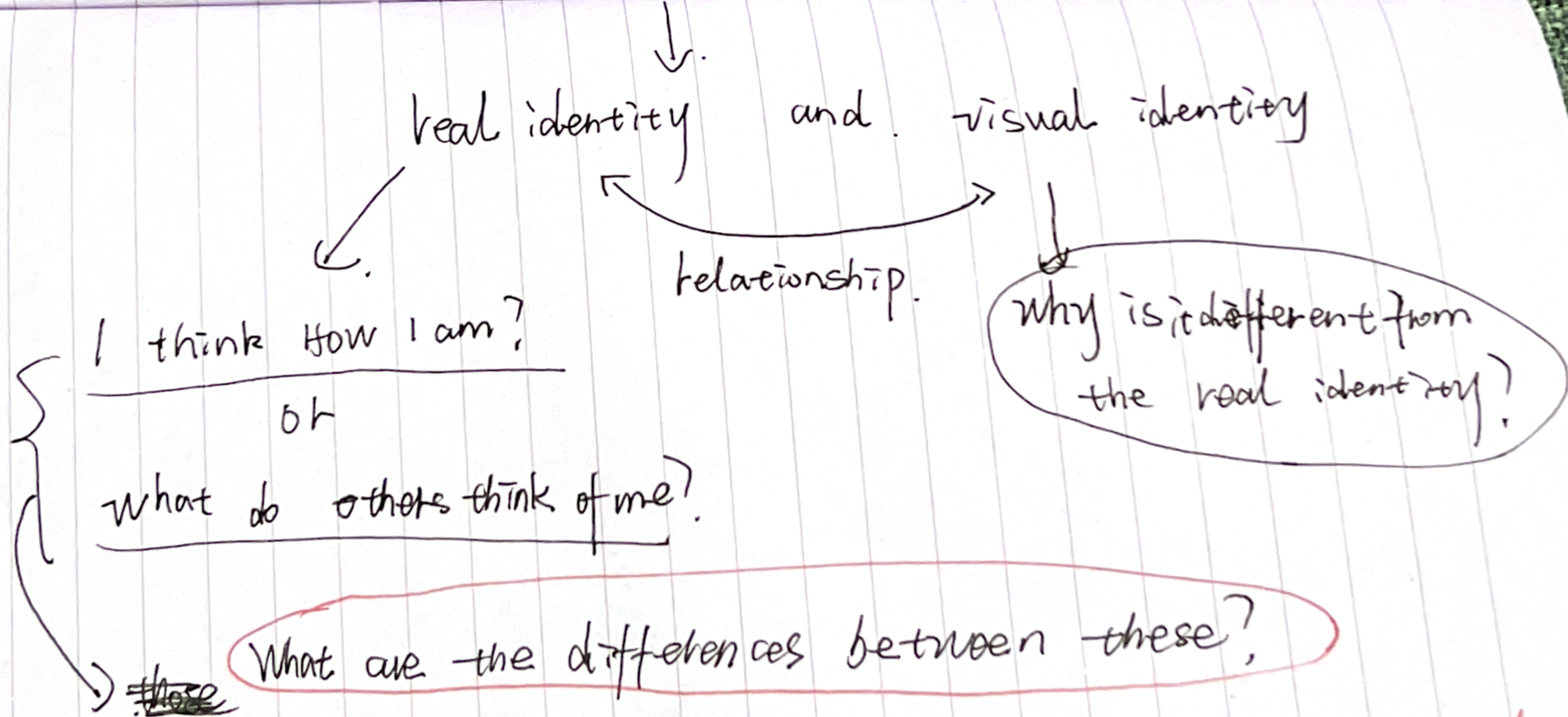
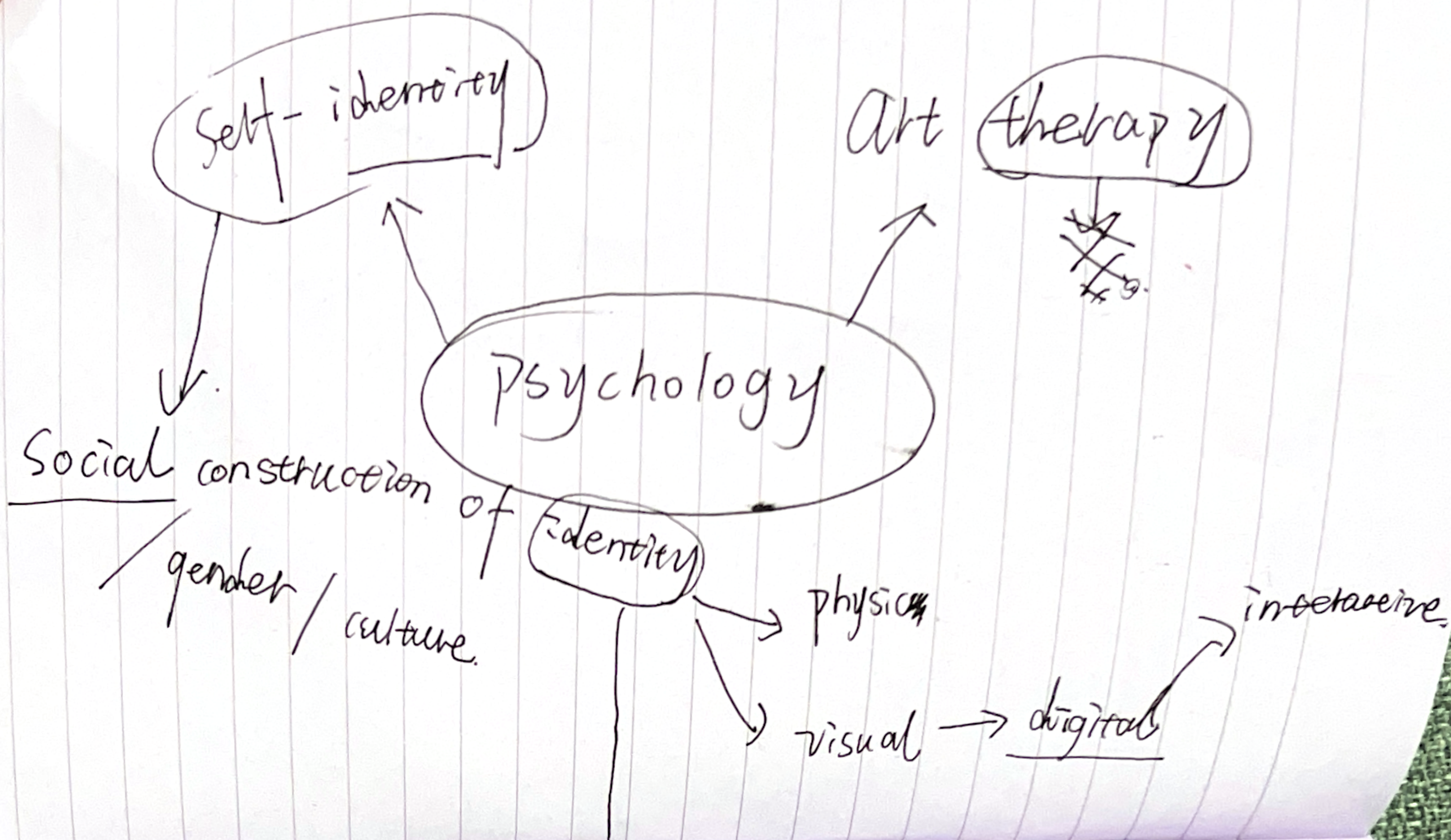
- weekly log >

6.14. - 6.22

task list:

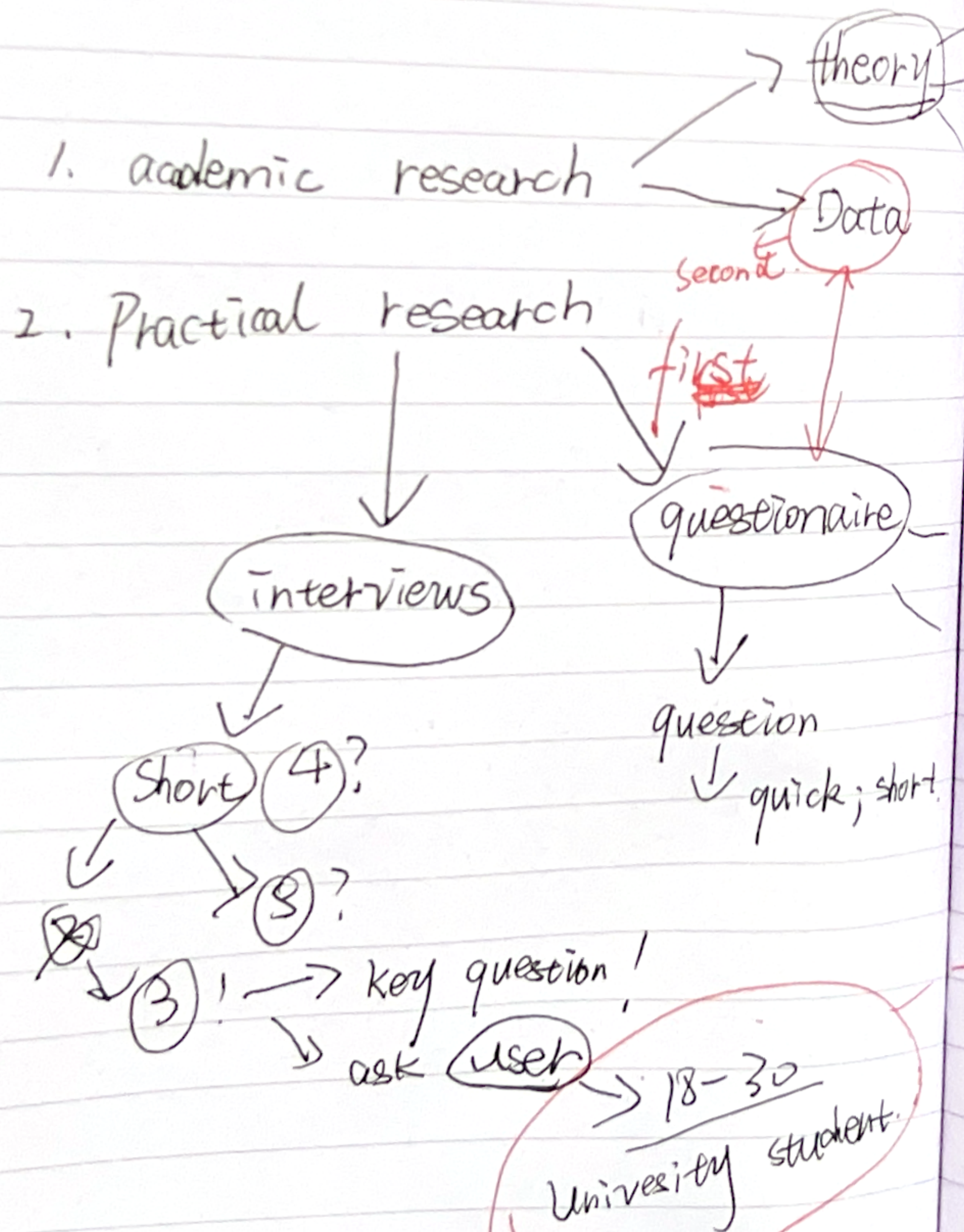
1. topic
2. Research question.
3. brief.





if these evaluations are afraid to be condensed into a single word "label", then how should my identity define who I really am?

6.23 - 6.29.



outsiders; ... cultural tags
appearance-based labels

(cognitive Dissonance algorithmic ones.)
Dissonance Reduction.

Identity labeling.

from: People, machines

online → 100 or 50

physical → about 10 → my classmates

ACT

People → 18-30 (student primary)

activities → submitting survey

Context → algorithms (machines) People.

Technology → web + video.

6.30 - 7.6

(Continue questionnaire)

Participants = 105 questions = 8

① External Identity Labels. (keywords)
(Q.1)

② Label Agreement on response
(Q2 + Q5)

③ Labeling Experiences / emotional reactions
Q3 + Q4

④ Cognitive Dissonance Score.
(Q6)

⑤ Symbolic Self - Metaphors
Q7.1

⑥ Consent (Q8)