Mapping the Unseen: Imaginative — Thinking for Future Worlds

From Sinophone Waterscapes to Local Visions Workshop

April 30, 2025, Wellesley College

Presented by Congyun ‘Mu Ming’ Gu

Resource and Reference

1. The Tools to Make Your Worlds Better: Lecture Notes #8 (2025) - from Brandon Sanderson's 2025 lecture series
2. *Wonderbook*: The Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction from Jeff VanderMeer
3. *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*, book by Orson Scott Card
4. Margaret Atwood's Masterclass on Creative Writing
5. *The Art of the Long View* by business executive and futurist, Peter Schwartz
6. ...and experience and thoughts from myself, of course :)

What Is Worldbuilding?

- Darko Suvin's SF def. : "the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition"
- Three Pillars for a SFF Writer
- The Magic Word
- A Layered World
- Avoiding the World Builder's disease

_What Demands to Be Built?
… Start with what haunts you.

INSPIRATION: INPUTS
FAMILY
ENVIRONMENT
PERSONAL EXPERIENCE
RELIGION
RESEARCH
LUCK/CHANCE
OTHER TEXTS
dark lighthouse seen from afar
a certain phrase in the novel The Night Circus
photo of mother as a teenager
baby's shoe stuck in a chain-link fence
hesitation in clerk's voice while saying "Is that all?"
being shouted at by a drunk in a subway station
the texture of a wall in Morocco
irritated by fantasy elements in Harry Potter
imagining pet lizard as size of a dragon
fascinated with angels as described in holy books
friend looks like shambling undead creature in morning
burying the family dog turned into an all-night adventure
father's old pipe hides a piece of microfiche
RECEPTIVITY IMAGINATION EMPATHY
CREATIVE PLAY LISTENING VISUALIZATION

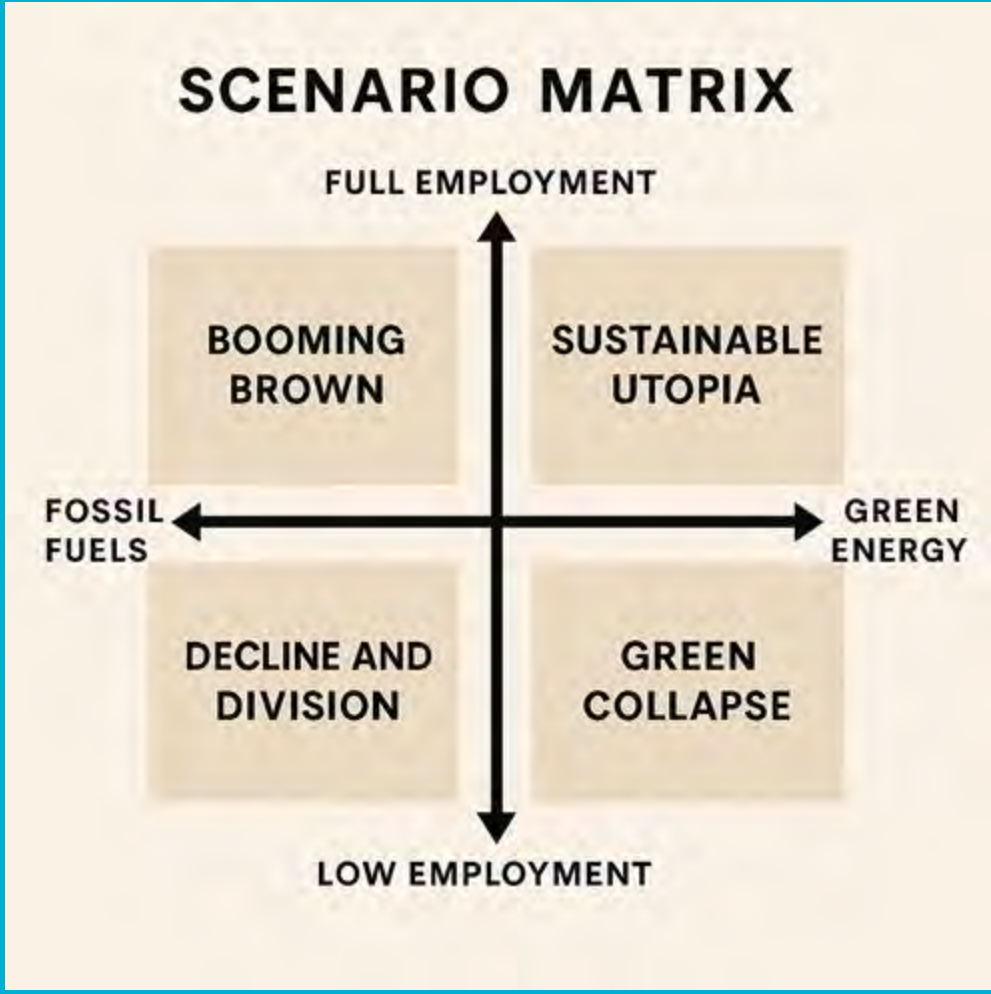
Designing a Speculative Future

- Axes of the Scenario

- *Think like a futurist, feel like a poet*

The plausible first brick: Scenario Planning

1. **Define the problem**
2. **List the external drivers of change**
3. **Consider the likelihood of each driver**
4. **Select (or vote upon) the two forces**
5. **Create a scenario matrix** with your two critical uncertainties on the axes
6. **Use additional world building techniques to visualize, extend, and/or add layers/depth…**



Writerly Techniques for Generating/Expanding Ideas

- Conceptual Breakthrough (Ted Chiang)
- Confluence (Ken Liu)
- Cognitive Simulation (Ann Lee)
- Viewpoint Shifting (N.K. Jemisin)
- …

What Kind of Future Are You Imagining?

- Technical vs. Conceptual Imagination
  - Predictive (Andrew Weir)
  - New Weird (VanderMeer)
  - Dystopian(Atwood)
  - Anthropological(Le Guin)
  - Ontological (Chiang)
  - Something outside of the genre: Olga Tokarczuk, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ling Ma…
- Your stance shapes your world.

Recap

Thank you and Have Fun!
For more questions,
find me at metamin.me