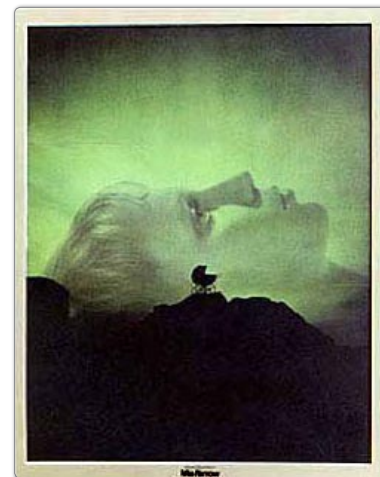


# Psychological Tension and the Fantastical Mechanism Involved in the Creative Process

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Courtesy of Paramount Pictures.

This paper begins with a discussion about various kinds of psychological tension; both ordinary and “fantastic.” Fluctuating tension states in the mind are important because they heighten senses and stimulate imagination, ultimately driving new and exciting possibilities in the built environment. Digital tools become an important playground for making seemingly impossible realities possibilities in the built world.

## The fantastic (an introduction)

From a psychological perspective, The “fantastic” and the “constructible” are terms that illustrate a particular dimension of psychic equilibrium, when used in juxtaposition. In fact, Todorov, a philosopher and literary theorist, supports this idea in his book called “The Fantastic,” where he describes the “fantastic” as moments in which characters waver between fantasy and reality when confronted with questions about reality. Our dreams, for example, are one place where reality can sometimes come into question. It is not uncommon for a dreamer once awake, to later question the realness of a particular dream asking him or herself when confronted with a familiar feeling, “did I dream it, or was it real?”

Roman Polanski constructs an entire film based on these kinds of fluctuating psychic states in his film “Rosemary’s Baby.” The film’s main character Rosemary Woodhouse, is filled with intense moments of both trust and paranoia. Throughout the film she torments herself (and the viewer) as she decides, scene by scene, whether she can feel safe or not with the people around her. Safety is also an important topic for Rosemary because she is, after all, pregnant. These kinds of fluctuating tension states that Polanski cho-

reographs allow the individual to construct reality as it fits Rosemary’s need for safety and security. In one scene Rosemary’s husband is loving and in the next, he’s “one of them.” Rosemary must decide whether the people around her are good or bad so she can chose the most responsible path for her baby. For Rosemary, the rules of reality must be re-written in order to validate her unique reality which, from a psychological perspective, supports not only her safety, but her or one’s ego-syntonic identity. If she decides the people around her are not out to get her, then she is safe and if they are, she must physically get away from them. Having the ability to shift from one reality to another keeps a person psychologically unified despite realities which can potentially cause psychological fragmentation. If a person experiences too much danger, there is the possibility that he or she might “fright” rather than “flight.”

Rosemary’s shifting mental state, although terrifying to her, points to a person’s ability to mentally move in and out of one psychological state into the next. This kind of movement stimulates the more logical side of design with imagination, driving new possibilities for physical space. For example, memory is fused with emotion and it is not uncommon for a person to remember a space as being larger or smaller than the last time he or she remembered it. In different words, the experiential aspect of size is proportional to a person’s visual expectation. A person’s emotions play a large role not only in the experiencing of space, but in creating it as well.

Rosemary fluctuates among different versions of the same story, coming to her own unique truth that supports her survival not only physically, but psychically as well. Rosemary’s story is important, because exactly these kinds of indecisive moments drive the fantastic or

supernatural states of thinking (e.g. paranoia). I would even add that the fantastic is defined by a moment where we are not only hovering without the prospect of a safe landing, but suspended between two “truths” (possibly more) before the individual either temporarily or more fixedly decides. Ideas about fluctuating psychic states such as the ones Rosemary goes through become important in the design world, as digital tools allow for experimentation of these hyper-real states. In fact, bringing conceptual design work in the digital realm affords designers the opportunity to explore and integrate aspects of physical building with the more imaginative parts of the mind.

### **Anxiety, false sensors, and the fantastic**

It might be argued that the fantastic is like a sensor gone haywire or berserk, which just happens to also support psychological survival. Sensors, otherwise known as our emotions, are extremely important in our decision making processes. From something as mundane as “should I take this job or that job?” to moments of crisis where heightened emotions (and the accompanying physiological response), our emotion leads us to physical safety. Anxiety or panic attacks might be considered moments in which our sensors are triggered by “false alarms” or psychoanalytically speaking, moments in which there is no “real” threat, but the threat is triggered by some un verbalized experience that has not reached conscious awareness. In this sense, I choose the conditions of my life rather than having outside conditions imposed upon me. The ability to rewrite rules that are incompatible with our values and morals, in other words to distort reality, can be easily argued as a strength in our sometimes arduous battle to psychically survive where outside forces (sometimes even people who have the audacity to point out our occasionally absurd behavior) are attacking our beliefs. This strength also lends itself well in the design world in terms of the creative aspects of design. Our ability to re-write or even postpone reality (otherwise known as denial), means that our mind is capable of making large and sometimes very creative leaps towards solving a design problem.

Fortunately, most people maintain psychic equilibrium, or cope with minor disruptions and fluctuations in their day, without even the slightest awareness of the feeling they are defending against. Examples might be fleeting moments of day dreaming during a boring business meeting or fidgeting in one’s seat when feeling anxious. In both examples, people are learning how to escape or to balance the demands of a particular reality so that psychic systems are not overloaded.

### **Vacillating between realities**

In psychoanalytic theory, the part of us that regulates these demands or negotiates the push and pull of reality is known as the Ego. In theory, the Ego stands directly in the center and the Id (also known as the impatient give-it-to-me parts of self), and Super-Ego are the part of the self that the ego must negotiate between. General psychological instability or excessive demands made by either the Id or Super-Ego in either direction, have the potential to force individuals with weak defense and ego structures into psychological pitfalls. These pitfalls are also known as behaviors that alleviate some of the excess demand, but might also get us into trouble. For example, binge drinking might ameliorate stress, but problems associated with this learned behavior might produce even more stress from the cleanup process.

Beyond the psychological description, and the demands of the Id and Super-ego that can sometimes fall into the pathological realm, these fluctuations can be considered good, new and exciting because they spark new realities. For example, Todorov uses the literary character Alvaro from Cazotte’s *Le Diable Amoureux* to illustrate and construct an entire experience; whether the woman he is in love with is truly a woman or if she is the devil. Either Alvaro is deeply connected and in love, or he has been betrayed. The fantastic might be viewed as the torment and exhilaration between which Alvaro wavers. Perhaps the torment and exhilaration of not knowing is not only meaning making, but what drives new exciting realities. For the architectural client, the imaginative and creative aspects of the design process typically occur in the conceptual or beginning phases of the design process (e.g. using photos of a jelly fish as a conceptual design metaphor for talking about the iridescent quality of a particular glass that the designer would like to use in their design in the final construction of a building). However I believe that digital tools are not only useful in the initial phases of a design project, but in all phases of the design work, as the designer potentially experiments with various qualities of light not necessary found in nature in the selection of materials. In other words, a design metaphor is able to be more visibly carried through in all aspects of the design process, not only in material selection, but in the construction of two walls coming together and how light reflects and plays itself out in a space. Digital tools offer such a platform for bringing together visual metaphors with the current realities of our built world.

## The fantastic as an important psychological mechanism in good design

These moments might also be identified as manic moments, where we are without need for sleep, food, or other basic needs because the feeling of living life on the edge provides new meaning. Either we are destined for greatness or doom, but nonetheless, the fear or pleasure involved in the not-knowing is meaning-making. In fact, Victor Frankel in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, writes about suffering and near death experiences and how they give one's life shape and meaning, if we successfully lived through the suffering.

The struggle for meaning in work as a designer, although not life threatening, is all-too-linked to the creative process. To be able to physically create something that is on the cusp of believability is not only artistic, but stretches the visual limitations of what a person thinks they're seeing. This also holds new and exciting possibilities for how we live, work and generally perceive space. The tensions between what is real and what is not real not only drives the creative process, but also the fantastic might be seen as wavering moments where the designer is both in-touch and out-of-touch with reality, pushing expectations for what is physically possible in the built world. A hallucination, although not physically "real," could be argued as a moment where desperation drives this kind of fantastic event. In this regard, a mirage mimics the qualities of this unreal event. A mirage possible in the physical world would be considered non-pathological, because a mirage is an optical phenomenon that can be captured by a camera lense, even though there are qualities to it that seem fantastic.

These types of fantastic visual experiences possible in the physical world are best recreated in the playground realm of digital tools, where designers can construct unreal events with detail into visual representations of what could be built.

### Tension states and designing

Fluctuating tension states also drive the creative process. This kind of tension is not necessarily about the designer's struggles between fantasy and reality, but in this state of tension the designer negotiates, both



*Double sunset effect.*



*Roadway mirage.*

*Pictures courtesy of UWO physics department.*

grasping and releasing the conceptual metaphor, as he or she translates it into a physical product. Just like the poet's word is at the tip of "your tongue . . . and you know it's not far. It's the one fish that won't swim into your net, a figure that hides in a crowd of similar figures, a domino stone in the facedown pool." Mueller eloquently and textually describes this struggle in "Stalking the Poem."

### Closing thoughts and Freud's the "uncanny"

The fantastic may be also seen as a magical force where things not describable are possible for a moment. Freud described these moments as "uncanny." When we experience something as uncanny, we may even experience a moment of doubt in our own sanity. It seems the uncanny and the fantastic share for the experienter a wavering between the real and not real. In the design world, digital tools offer a playground for exploring the types of tensions discussed in this paper, offering the possibility of moving the fantastic from a psychic phenomenon to a built one.



**Jean Rahbar** is currently a licensed psychotherapist practicing in South Dartmouth, MA. She combines her interests in art, architecture and psychoanalysis as a doctoral student in Psychoanalysis and Culture at the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis in Boston. She believes that the cultural aspects of perception (largely unconscious) shape our perceptions about the built environment and that digital tools can be one platform used to study various kinds of perception. She also earned her bachelor's degree in a major called Design and Environmental Analysis from Cornell University and her masters in psychoanalysis from the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis.