The Diorama

Ton Haarmans · Wide Open Windows



When I was a child, we made kijkdozen, shoeboxes turned into small worlds. A hole cut into one side. Inside: paper trees, drawn horizons, bits of fabric, glued figures. You looked through the opening and, suddenly, there was space.

Not flat. Not a picture. A scene.

It was never just an object. As long as you looked, you were in it.

There was no way to step back to see the whole thing “as it really was.” No correct perspective. No place from which the diorama could be grasped in its entirety. The moment your eye entered the box, the box became a world. It organized depth, distance, foreground and background. It produced a here, a there, and a sense of being somewhere.

Only when you pulled away did it become cardboard again.

Much later, I began to suspect that what we call a world of experience might work exactly like that.

Not something we are located in, but something that forms around a point of view. Not a neutral container in which things appear, but a staging that appears together with things.

A world is not what is there. It is how “there” happens.

We often speak about experience as if it were something we could step back from, examine, compare, and order. As if we could move from one level to another, from surface to depth, from appearance to a more fundamental ground. As if, somewhere, a higher vantage point were available.

But a diorama does not allow for that.

There is no place behind the opening from which the scene can be judged without already entering another scene. There is no position from which the box can be weighed while it is functioning as a world. The only thing that ever happens is this: one viewing space gives way to another.

When you leave the box, you do not arrive outside all dioramas. You enter a larger one.

This is what makes hierarchies of experience so tempting, and so deceptive.

Again and again, certain configurations of experience present themselves as deeper, truer, more encompassing, more fundamental than others. Religious worlds, spiritual worlds, scientific worlds, psychological worlds, non-dual worlds. They do not merely appear. They interpret. They situate. They include other worlds within themselves and explain them.

And because they include them, they feel as if they must stand outside them.

Yet their sense of “outside” is produced in exactly the same way as any other world: by organizing experience around a particular opening, with its own logic, tone, exclusions, and forms of obviousness.

There is no ladder here. Only a table full of boxes.

Some dark. Some luminous. Some violent. Some intimate. Some austere. Some seductive. Some almost empty. Some saturated with interpretation. Some almost silent.

They differ radically. In structure. In affect. In what they make possible and what they make unthinkable.

But difference is not hierarchy.

A child’s shoebox world is not less a world than a cathedral. A moment of irritation is not less a world than a feeling of unity. A scientific cosmology is not less a world than a mystical vision. A non-dual configuration is not closer to experience than the taste of coffee or the sound of a passing car.

Each, when it appears, appears fully as world.

I was recently reminded of this in a very ordinary way.

My partner came home with a small book about chakras.

In my world, chakras do not exist. They appear only as New Age mythology. They have no place in the way experience organizes itself for me. They do not function as objects, energies, centers, or explanatory principles. They simply do not show up.

But this does not mean that the “New Age world” is false.

It means that chakras do not appear in my diorama.

And there is no court from which my diorama could declare the other one invalid. There is only the fact that it is another way in which experience takes shape, another viewing box with its own internal evidences, practices, sensations, expectations, confirmations.

It is entirely possible that chakras “work” in that world.

Not as hidden objects waiting to be discovered behind experience, but as elements of a scene that genuinely shape what can be felt, noticed, feared, cultivated, healed, or interpreted. They may organize attention. They may structure bodily sensation. They may create meaning, coherence, and transformation.

Not because they correspond to something outside all worlds, but because within that world they are part of how reality appears.

This is the point at which my own intuitions become difficult to communicate, because they are easily mistaken for either relativism or critique.

I am not saying that all worlds are equal. I am not saying that anything goes. I am not saying that every claim is as good as any other.

Worlds differ profoundly in what they do: how they structure suffering and care, power and vulnerability, imagination and fear, openness and closure, violence and responsibility.

But none of these differences installs a higher viewpoint.

There is no experience of no-diorama. There are only dioramas that represent themselves as frameless, as boundless, as prior. And those, too, have their openings. Their climates of obviousness. Their ways of making some things central and others unthinkable.

Even emptiness stages itself. Even “before worlds” appears as a world. Even the absence of form has a form of appearing.

What changes from one diorama to another is not the degree of reality, but the way reality is articulated: what counts as inside and outside, what counts as meaningful, what feels central or peripheral, what kinds of questions can even arise.

To see this is not to collapse all worlds into sameness. It is to take their differences seriously enough not to rank them.

Because the moment one world is declared higher, the others are quietly diminished. Reduced to steps, illusions, confusions, preliminary sketches. What presented itself as liberation becomes a court of judgment. What claimed to transcend normativity reinstates it.

The diorama does not judge the other dioramas. It only replaces them.

This is also where the dioramic approach begins to take shape more explicitly. It is not merely an image, and not merely a metaphor. It is a way of looking.

It asks not only what appears, but how a world is assembled. What has been selected. What has been brought forward. What has been pushed into the background. What has been excluded altogether. What gives a world its coherence. What allows it to feel natural, inevitable, or true.

In that sense, the dioramic approach is operational. It can be applied wherever a world appears. Science, religion, spirituality, politics, identity, language, psychology, art, philosophy. Wherever experience takes on a stable shape, the same question can be asked: what kind of viewing space has been built here?

This does not abolish comparison. On the contrary. Once worlds are seen as configurations rather than final revelations, they can be compared more precisely. One can ask which world sees more, excludes less, distorts less, clarifies more, or generates less violence. But such comparisons no longer take place from nowhere. They take place from within another arrangement.

That is the harder point. There is no final platform outside all worlds. No neutral tribunal. No pure view without framing. Every claim to reality already arises within a particular configuration of salience, meaning, tone, and exclusion.

This is not an optional philosophical add-on. It is built into the very fact that a world appears as coherent at all. The moment a world takes shape, a framing is already at work. The only question is whether that framing remains invisible to itself.

The dioramic approach did not arise from a desire to invent one more theory. It arose from the gradual recognition that no standpoint could finally sustain itself as absolute. Again and again, what first looked self-grounding turned out to depend on composition, emphasis, omission, and interpretive structure.

That recognition did not lead to indifference. It did not flatten everything into “anything goes.” It opened the possibility of a different kind of rigor. Not the rigor of a final foundation, but the rigor of comparison without absolutes. Different worlds could be placed side by side, not to discover which one stands outside all the others, but to see more clearly what each one does.

This also reframes what I am doing when I write essays, or build “worlds” on a screen.

I am not describing a reality behind appearances. I am constructing additional viewing spaces. Small scenes that organize attention, language, and affect in particular ways. They do not point out of experience. They rearrange experience.

They are not windows onto what is. They are more cardboard boxes.

And so are these sentences.

They invite a way of looking. They do not offer a place to stand.

If this text works at all, it will not be because it reveals something deeper, but because it temporarily installs another diorama, one in which the idea of depth itself becomes a feature of the scene rather than a route out of it.

A viewing box in which “higher” and “lower” quietly lose their grip, not by argument, but by becoming unnecessary.