Dreams

Ton Haarmans · Wide Open Windows



Last night, there was a place.

Not an image, not a thought, not a story I was telling myself. There was a place I was in. It had space. It had others. It had a mood, a gravity, a sense of direction. Things mattered there. Something was at stake. I moved through it without hesitation, without distance, without interpretation. I did not believe in that world. I lived in it.

Only later, from here, do I call it a dream.

While it was happening, it was simply the world.

The world that appears at night

The striking fact about dreams is not their strangeness. It is their normality.

A dream does not usually announce itself as a dream. It presents itself as reality. With continuity, coherence, and affective weight. There is fear, urgency, expectation, disappointment. There are objects that resist, others that invite, situations that demand response. Within the dream, there is no external standpoint from which its status could be questioned. There is only the world, doing what worlds do: organizing experience into a livable form.

In a dream, there is a body. Not necessarily this body, not reliably this shape, not always obeying familiar physics. But there is a center of orientation. A somewhere from which seeing happens, from which movement is initiated, to which sensations seem to belong. There is up and down, near and far, before and after. There is a here that is not chosen.

With that body comes a world that fits it. Distances feel right. Objects have scale. Events have consequence. A gesture can console, a sound can threaten, a face can shift an entire atmosphere. The world is not assembled piece by piece. It arrives already organized.

This organization is not primarily visual. It is affective, pragmatic, existential. Things are not first neutral and then interpreted. They are immediately inviting, obstructing, promising, disappointing. Meaning is not added. It is built into the way the world shows up.

Waking up is not an argument

Then, sometimes, there is a break.

Not an argument. Not a refutation. Not an insight. A break.

The dream-world does not dissolve because it has been judged false. It vanishes because another world takes over. The field reorganizes. The body is suddenly here. The room asserts itself. Memory rearranges. The sense of self snaps into a different position. What a moment ago was unquestionable becomes thin, distant, almost absurd.

It is tempting to say: the dream was unreal, this is real.

But that is not what the experience itself shows.

What it shows is a shift of worlds. A shift of the entire configuration within which reality appears.

From within the dream, the dream was not less real. It was simply real. Its reality did not depend on correspondence, verification, or external confirmation. It depended on functioning. On coherence. On the fact that it held.

Only from within the next world does the previous one become a dream.

Mindsets as world-formats

This is where the dream becomes more than a curiosity. It becomes a minimal laboratory.

It shows that a world does not need to be grounded in an external reality in order to function as reality. It only needs to organize experience in a way that sustains orientation, involvement, and response.

In other words, it only needs to operate.

What I call a mindset can be approached in exactly this way. Not as a set of beliefs inside a world, but as the formatting of a world. A mindset determines, prior to reflection, what counts as an object, what counts as a self, what can appear as a problem, what can register as evidence, what can even be noticed at all.

A mindset is not a view on reality. It is a way reality takes shape.

This also explains why no world can step outside itself by argument alone. A dream is not exited by reasoning. It is exited by reconfiguration. Doubt itself unfolds inside a configuration that grants it meaning and limits. Even skepticism is formatted.

The durability of the waking world

The waking world feels different, of course. It is more stable. More continuous. More densely intersubjective. It resists us. It remembers itself. It pushes back. It is supported by instruments, institutions, recordings, and agreements that outlive any individual perspective.

But these are differences of degree, not of principle.

They describe how a world is maintained, not what a world is.

Here too there is a body that is not chosen, a center of orientation that is simply found. Here too there is a field already organized into relevance and irrelevance, sense and nonsense, possibility and impossibility. Here too meaning is not added after the fact, but embedded in how things solicit us, concern us, or fade into the background.

We do not wake up into raw reality. We wake up into another world. One that has learned to hold.

This durability has existential consequences. A stable world does not merely offer continuity. It produces identity. It allows a biography to form. It lets commitments accumulate, responsibilities bind, losses sediment. It makes projects possible. It gives fear a future and hope a timeline.

Dreams rarely support this. Their selves are thin. Their histories shallow. Their deaths reversible. Their stakes intense but short-lived. They burn bright and vanish.

The waking world, by contrast, keeps accounts. It preserves traces. It returns what we try to leave behind. It confronts us with a past we did not choose and a future that will not wait.

That is why it feels not only more real, but more serious.

And yet, its seriousness is not proof of a metaphysical status. It is an effect of structure. Of the way this world loops consequences, bodies, and narratives into a dense, self-reinforcing web.

What we call the real world is not the absence of world-making. It is the most durable world-making we have learned to inhabit. Durable enough to build on. Durable enough to forget.

No final awakening

Sometimes the shift is abrupt. We call it waking up.

Sometimes it is softer. A dream loosens without fully collapsing. Lucidity flickers. Something does not fit, but nothing has yet fallen apart. The world continues, but with a hairline fracture running through it.

These moments are easily romanticized. As awakenings, insights, breakthroughs. But phenomenologically, they are simpler and more unsettling. What weakens is not a belief. What weakens is the world's grip.

Objects still appear. Situations still unfold. A self is still here. But their necessity thins. Their obviousness falters. The field no longer fully convinces itself.

This can happen in dreams. It can also happen in waking life. Not as a mystical event, but as a structural one: the partial suspension of a configuration's authority. The feeling is not that reality disappears, but that its way of being real becomes visible.

The dream teaches something precise. Not that reality is fragile, but that reality is active.

A world is not something we stand in front of. It is something that is continually taking place. Something that assembles body, memory, relevance, and sense into a workable whole. Something that convinces itself.

This is why the question "is this real?" always arrives too late. By the time it can be asked, a world is already operative.

There is no experiential outside from which reality could be inspected.

There are only passages. From one coherence to another. From one way of holding to another way of holding. Even the most radical insight does not end this movement. It becomes part of a new stabilization.

In this sense, awakening is not an escape from dreaming, but a change of dream.

Not from illusion to truth, but from one world to another.

Some worlds are brief. Others are heavy with history. Some collapse each night. Others survive us, and will continue without us. But none of them reveal a final ground behind appearing. None of them step outside the activity by which worlds happen.

The dream does not relativize reality. It exposes its structure.

It shows that being real is something a world does.