



Urban nature between modern and postmodern aesthetics:

reflections based on the social constructivist approach

Structure

1. Remarks on the social construction of landscape and nature
2. Different logics in dealing with landscapes
3. Aspects of the relationship between society and nature
4. Modernity and postmodernity
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An aerial photograph showing a large wind farm with numerous white wind turbines. In the background, a city skyline is visible through a hazy atmosphere. The foreground features a road and some greenery.

Remarks on the social construction of landscape and nature

Some remarks on social constructivism

- From the social constructionism point of view there is “nowhere such a thing as a **pure and simple fact**” (Schütz 1971, p. 5).
- **Previous knowledge** of the world shapes every perception.
- Hence, our way of seeing the world is rather the result of a “**highly complex interpretation process**” (Schütz 1971, pp. 123-124) than an isolated event.
- Within this process, “current perceptions and **earlier perceptions**” (Schütz 1971, pp. 123-124) are juxtaposed.

Social construction of landscape

Landscape cannot be understood as a given object but rather as a **socially defined construct** of human consciousness.

In the **process of socialization** human beings learn to apprehend what may be designated as landscape.

Moreover, they learn the connections in which these designs apply without losing **social acceptance** when misdoing.



Four dimensions of landscape (Kühne 2008)

1) The **societal landscape** “as a socially defined object and ensemble of signs” (Hard 2002[1987]: 233) and hence as a societal store of knowledge (Berger/ Luckmann 1966) on the arrangement and interpretation of **objects and symbols into landscape**. This also gives rise to the stereotypes taking effect in concrete individual construction processes.

Berger, P. L./Luckmann, Th. (1966): The Social Construction of Reality. New York.

Hard, G. (2002[1987]): Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Raum. In: Hard, G. (Hg.): Landschaft und Raum. Aufsätze zur Theorie der Geographie. Osnabrück, 211-234.

Kühne, O. (2008): Distinktion – Macht – Landschaft. Zur sozialen Definition von Landschaft. Wiesbaden.

Four dimensions of landscape II

2) The **individually updated societal landscape** as a personal reconstruction based on societal ideas of landscape.

3) The **appropriated physical landscape** as those objects in space that are concretely relied upon for the construction of the societal landscape and its individual updates.



Four dimensions of landscape III

4) The **physical space** as a theoretical conceptualisation of the spatial-relational arrangement of things in general, irrespective of whether they are relied upon for the social and/or individual construction of landscape or not.



Appropriated physical landscape...

- is created by the **dictates** of economic necessity,
- **modified** by social enforced norms and values,
- within the **limits of political will**,
- manifested in the **legally permitted**.

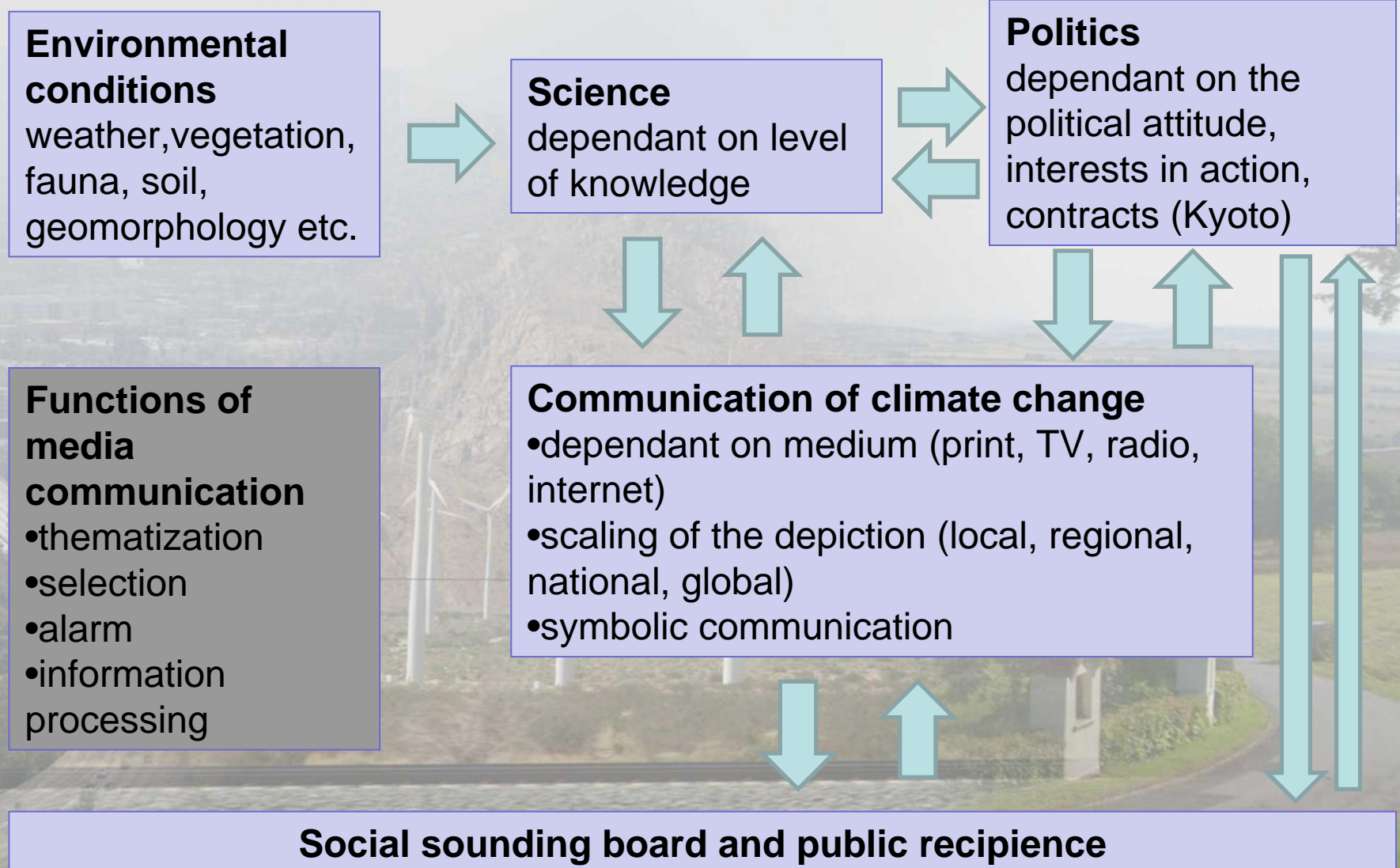
The result: landscape is created by physically manifested spatially-social by-effects of the action of differentiated **quantity of power**.



An aerial photograph showing a large wind farm with numerous white turbines. In the background, a city skyline is visible through a hazy atmosphere, with mountains behind it. A road with traffic is on the left, and a winding road with a small stone structure is on the right.

Different logics in dealing with landscapes

The social mediation process of landscape change



Different **'ownerships'** of appropriated physical landscape (Olwig 2002)

- Individual ownership** of individual objects
- Common good** of landscape

Dimensions of societal landscape (Ipsen 2006)

- Cognitive**
- aesthetic**
- emotional**

Ipsen, D. (2006): Ort und Landschaft. Wiesbaden.
Olwig, K. R. (2002): Landscape, Nature, and the Body Politic. From Britain's Renaissance to America's New World. London.



| | Percentage | Mentions | | Percentage | Mentions |
|-------------------------------------|------------|----------|------------------|------------|----------|
| Woods | 96,26 | 438 | Smaller towns | 32,09 | 146 |
| Meadows | 95,16 | 433 | Single people | 21,32 | 97 |
| Brooks | 91,21 | 415 | Sounds | 20,88 | 95 |
| Villages | 83,08 | 378 | Groups of people | 19,56 | 89 |
| Farms | 73,63 | 335 | Industrial firms | 14,07 | 64 |
| Scents | 61,54 | 280 | Wind generators | 10,99 | 50 |
| Atmospheres (in the sense of moods) | 60,66 | 276 | Cities | 8,79 | 40 |
| Mountain ranges | 59,12 | 269 | Motor-ways | 8,79 | 40 |
| Clouds | 51,65 | 235 | Cars | 6,37 | 29 |
| Country roads | 44,84 | 204 | Other | 5,05 | 23 |
| Showers | 41,10 | 187 | I don't know. | 0,22 | 1 |
| Single flowers | 35,38 | 161 | | | |

Survey in the Saarland. 455 survey participants, several answers possible: 'What belongs to a landscape?' (Kühne 2006)

An aerial photograph showing a large wind farm with numerous white turbines. In the background, a city skyline is visible through a hazy atmosphere. The foreground features a road and some greenery.

Aspects of the relationship between society and nature

Society and Nature

- The society constructs nature **ambivalently**.
- Nature describes “the **primary and the good** (...) that contrasts the society as the artificial and even destroying”.
- Nevertheless nature means “the **wild and the threatening**, which is domesticated to protect the society” (Groß 2006, p.5).
- In the city, nature exists in a **domesticated** (e.g. as park) or in a **less domesticated condition** (e.g. as sparse flora).

An aerial photograph showing a large wind farm in a valley. In the background, a city skyline is visible under a hazy sky. The foreground features a winding road, a stone wall, and some small structures. The overall scene is a blend of modern infrastructure and natural landscape.

Modernity and postmodernity

Postmodernism

- “Postmodernism is not so much a critique or radical refusal of modernism but its radical *exaggeration*. It is **more modern** than **modernism**.”
- Postmodernism hyperbolically accentuates the processes of increased turnover time, **speed** of circulation and the **disposability** of subjects and objects” (Lash & Urry 1994, p.3).
- A central idea of postmodernism is the incredulity towards **meta-narratives** (Lyotard 1979).

Lash, S. & Urry, J., 1994. *Economies of Signs and Space*. Sage, London.

Lyotard, J.-F., 1979. *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir (The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge)*. Les Ed. de Minuit, Paris.

Politics and Postmodernity

Asymmetry of political problems and political viability.

Displacement of politics in the competition for power, law and fundamental questions of social order "in favor of economic, legal, scientific, media and **dramatic and symbolic-aesthetic discourses**" (Jain 2000: 423).

Reversal of policy, "**in system external 'constraints'**" (Jain 2000: 423)

Politics and Postmodernity

Postmodern understanding, "according to which it must be the moral qualifications of the people who contrives in remarkable ways to shape societies and against all odds it - to **secure survival** - more or less happy" (Bauman 2009: 54).



Flexibility of social relations

Increasing mobility

- (Partial) resolution of the traditional village community

- Reducing the importance of **neighborhoods**

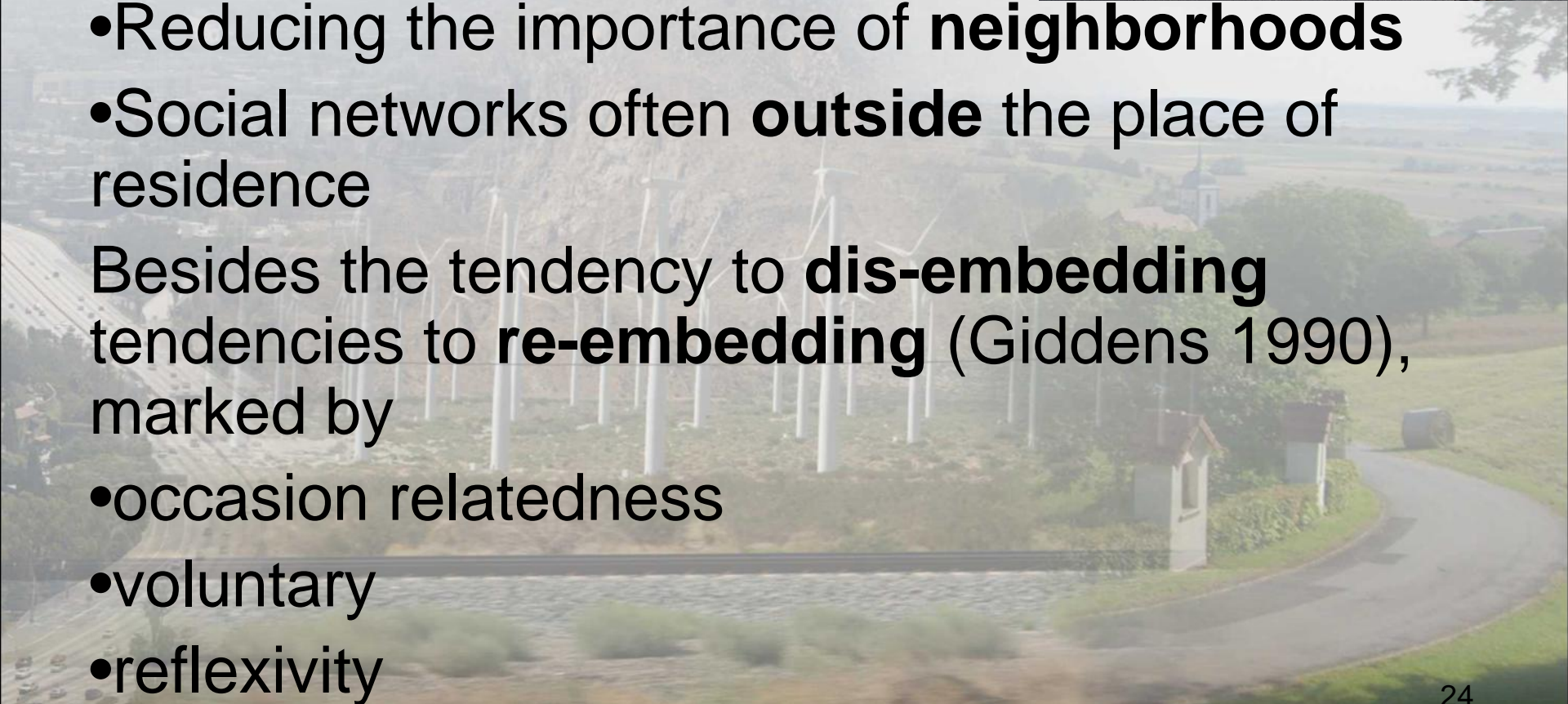
- Social networks often **outside** the place of residence

Besides the tendency to **dis-embedding** tendencies to **re-embedding** (Giddens 1990), marked by

- occasion relatedness

- voluntary

- reflexivity



Postmodern aesthetics

- Rehabilitation of **emotions**,
- the aesthetic mode of the **sublime** gains in importance (Lyotard 1979),
- reality is increasingly '**aesthetically constructed**' (Welsch 1995),
- valorization of artifacts from the **past**,
- esteem of **hybridity**.

Lyotard, J.-F., 1979. *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir (The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge)*. Les Ed. de Minuit, Paris.

Welsch, W., 1995. *Ästhetisches Denken (Aesthetic Thinking)*. Reclam, Stuttgart.





The appraisal of urban nature

An aerial photograph showing a large wind farm in a valley. The wind turbines are white and arranged in rows. In the background, a city skyline is visible through a hazy atmosphere. The foreground shows a road and some greenery.

- One of the essential aims of modernity is ‘**Reinheit**’ (which means a synthesis of purity, cleanness and spruceness).
- The lack of ‘Reinheit’ is to be classified as a problematic status, caused by the **discrepancy** to this social norm.
- This discrepancy is to be **eliminated** by implementing ‘Reinheit’ (Fayet 2003).
- The elimination of dirt is a permanent process, because the human organism is –to keep up his physical functions – “a **dirt-producing existence**” (Hasse 2000, p.38).

Fayet, R., 2003. *Reinigungen. Vom Abfall der Moderne zum Kompost der Nachmoderne* (Purifications. From the Waste of the Modern to the Compost of the Postmodern). Passagen-Verl., Wien.

Hasse, J., 2000. *Die Wunden der Stadt. Für eine neue Ästhetik unserer Städte* (The Wounds of our City. Towards a New Aesthetic of Our Cities). Passagen-Verl., Wien.

The modern city and nature

- The modern clean city symbolizes the idea of **superiority of modern culture to nature**, and of reason as an element of culture to emotion as an element of nature.
- The clean and neat (in the sense of aesthetics: **beauty**) symbolizes modern **well-organized relationships**.
- The city as expression of culture shall not be 'polluted' by **not-organized nature**.



Los Angeles



Degree of influence

Natural

Cultural

Shopping malls

Industrial landscape

Garden

Park

„no mans`s land“

primeval forest

urban and suburban examples

The different degree of hybridity of different urban landscapes

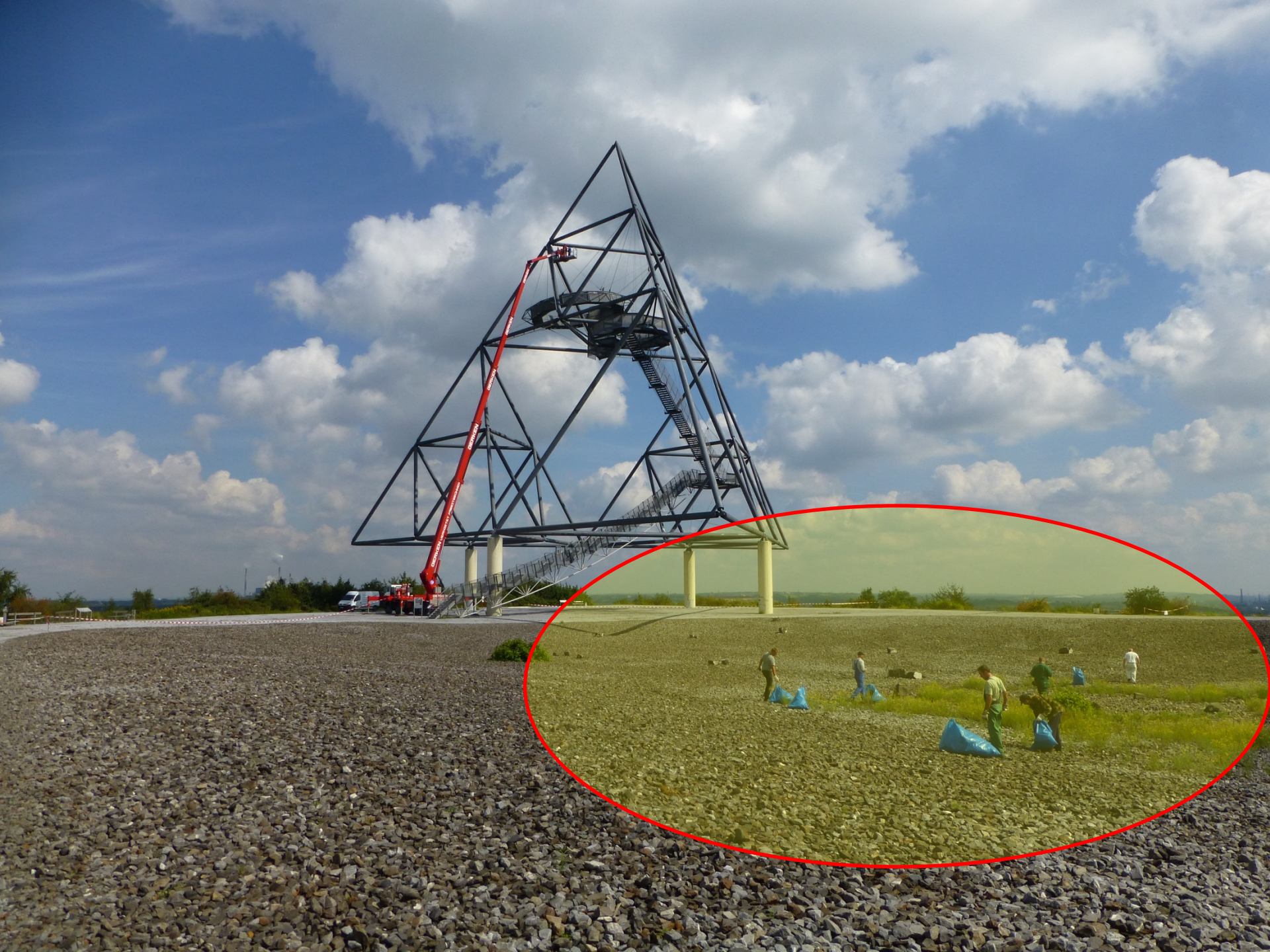
The postmodern city and nature

- Postmodern aesthetics challenge and **deconstruct the dichotomies of city and landscape, culture and nature, cognition and emotion** (Sloterdijk 1988).
 - Postmodernity accepts **hybridity**.
 - So postmodernity **tolerates the less domesticated nature** in cities.
- This tolerance opens up new possibilities of the **composition of the cityscape**, especially for ruined buildings and areas.
- Postmodernity “uses the richness of historic waste and practices as continuous recycling of stocks from the sphere of discarded to the sphere of the **accepted**” (Fayet 2003, p.167).




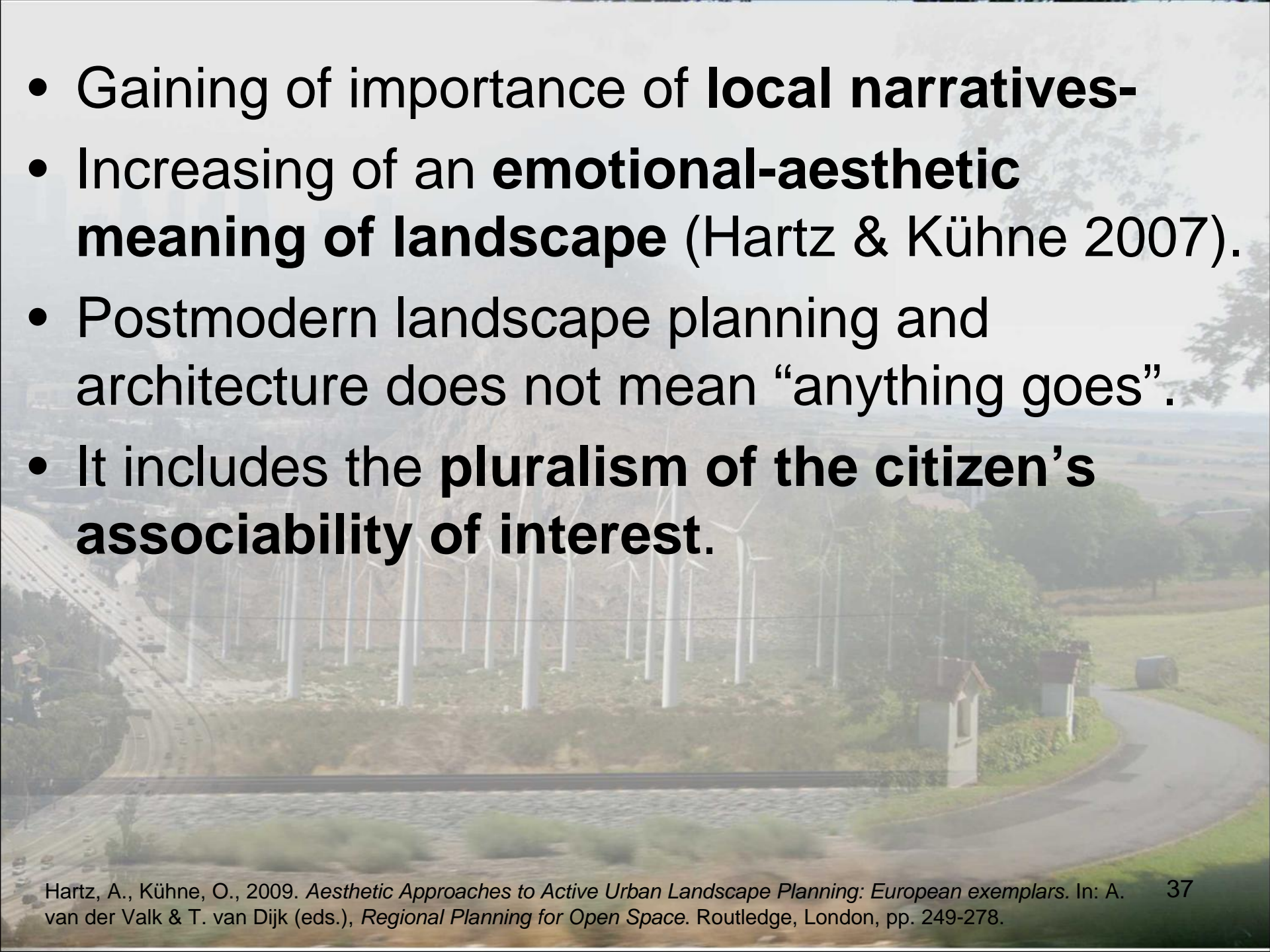
Fayet, R., 2003. *Reinigungen. Vom Abfall der Moderne zum Kompost der Nachmoderne* (Purifications. From the Waste of the Modern to the Compost of the Postmodern). Passagen-Verl., Wien.

Sloterdijk, P., 1988. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Univ. of Minneapolis Press, Minneapolis.



Conclusion

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- An aerial photograph of a landscape. In the foreground, a paved road curves through a green field. To the left, a multi-lane highway with several cars is visible. In the middle ground, there is a small building with a gabled roof and a chimney, surrounded by trees and a fence. The background shows a hazy, rolling landscape with more trees and distant structures. The overall scene is a mix of natural and built environments.
- The constructivist's perspective in combination with postmodern approaches: **ironic** relationship to place, space and landscape.
 - This sea change induces a **perspective of tolerance, variety and pluralism.**
 - **Hegemonies** in landscape interpretations and in norms of designs contradict this landscape philosophy.

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- Gaining of importance of **local narratives-**
 - Increasing of an **emotional-aesthetic meaning of landscape** (Hartz & Kühne 2007).
 - Postmodern landscape planning and architecture does not mean “anything goes”.
 - It includes the **pluralism of the citizen’s associability of interest.**



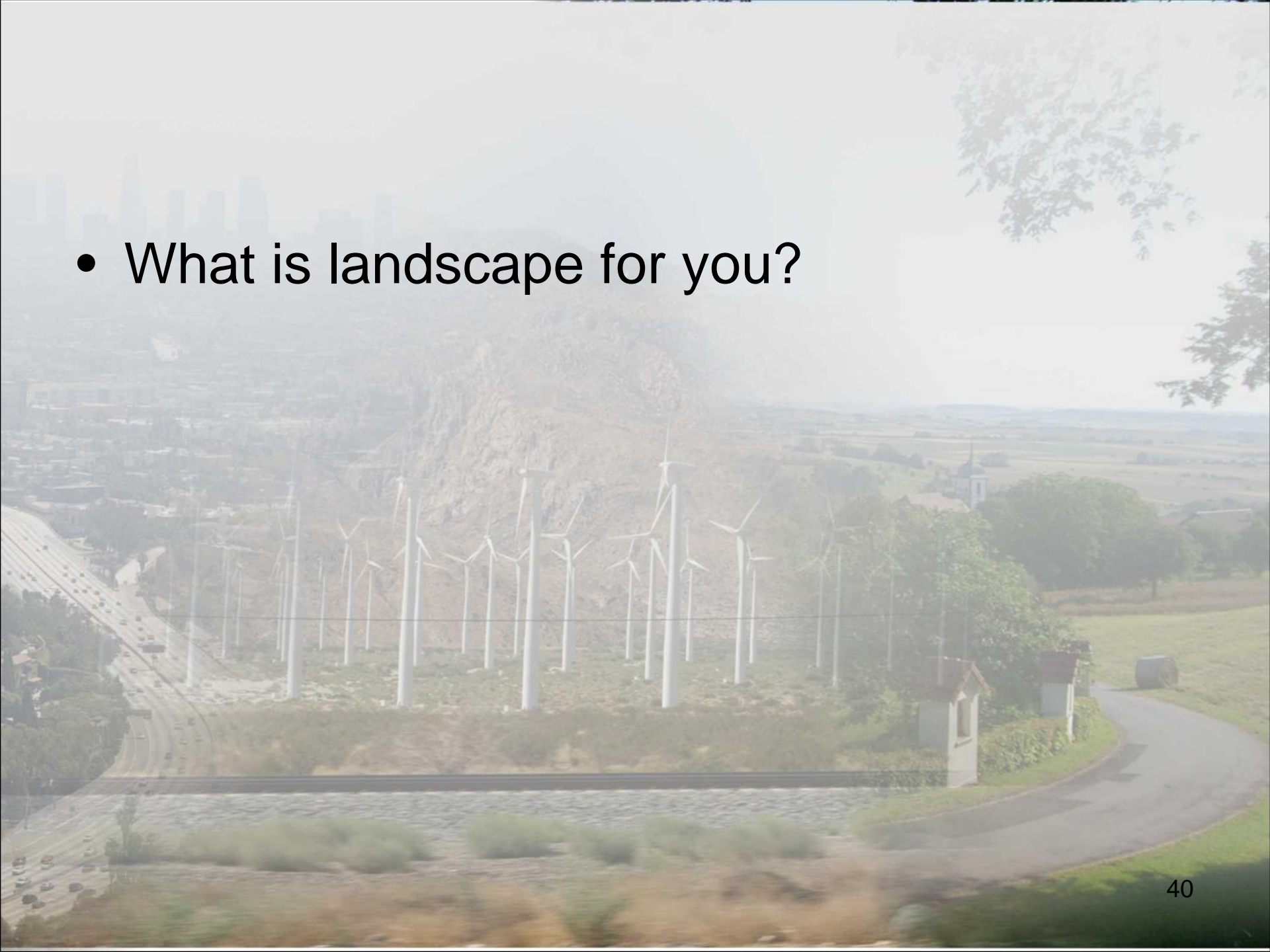
THANK YOU FOR YOUR
ATTENTION

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Questions, we could discuss

- Does in your culture exist a clear division between ,culture‘ and ,nature‘?

- What is landscape for you?



- Is it meaningful to distinguish between cultural and natural landscapes?

- What does landscape mean in the postmodern era?







