Article

Noise in the landscape: Disputing the visibility of mundane technological objects

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Abstract
In recent years, a controversy has arisen in Japan regarding an ongoing landscape policy proposing to eliminate the forest of utility poles and electric wires that covers almost all urban and rural landscapes. The controversy is somewhat peculiar vis-à-vis the existing study of landscape, partly because of the utterly ubiquitous and non-monumental characteristics of the poles and partly because of the general apathy in public reaction to them. Drawing upon diverse academic sources, this interdisciplinary exploration unfolds a complex entanglement of tacit landscape ideas behind the controversy. The author discusses the effectiveness and limits of addressing both the substantial and visual aspects of the poles vis-à-vis the public and policy makers by using three conceptual frameworks: (1) 'erasure' in the landscape as palimpsest, (2) the dual aspects of 'noise', and (3) *artialisation*, in order to understand this mundane element of technological objects in the context of creating contemporary landscapes.

Keywords
aesthetics, infrastructure, Japan, landscape, palimpsest, technological object, visual art

Introduction

On 10 November 2014, Hokusai's print of *Gaifu Kaisei* (Fine Wind, Clear Morning), also known as Red Fuji, and part of his famous series of Mt Fuji prints, appeared on a website with a small twist on the original. The picture is covered with a dark silhouette of utility poles and electric wires that, for some, reflects the ugly symbol of the predicament of contemporary landscape in Japan.

This website is the homepage of No-Poles Network, which grants awards to photos of disappointing Japanese landscapes that are marred by a view of these poles and wires

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Figure 1. Poles and wires. © Photograph: Masato Fukushima.

(see Figure 1).[1] This movement is part of a larger campaign from recent decades to beautify Japan, which has become more visible of late in anticipation of the Olympics in Tokyo in 2021, and seen in the policy statement of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism to bury them underground (MLIT, 2003).

Critics have long claimed that these poles are not only dangerous during disasters but also fundamentally unsightly, compared to typical views of, say, old towns in Europe where no such poles are visible (e.g. Kerr, 2014; Koike and Matsubara, 2015; Matsubara, 2002; No-Poles Network, 2010). These poles were originally needed for rapid rehabilitation from the damage of the last war, as they were cheaper and easier to set up than new underground networks (Iwata, 2014). With the help of new laws on landscapes (Fukuzawa, 2005; Hayashi, 2004), the government, construction companies, architects and academics launched a campaign to clean up the landscape by holding a photo competition on the web above.

A counter-argument against such a move emerged from scholars, artists, and even pop culture leaders. These diverse people tried not only to criticize theoretically the basic assumption of the no-poles movement but also more positively to rediscover the tacit beauty of such a technological landscape using various methods (Anno et al., 2009; also see Igarashi, 2006).

No doubt, this controversy involves the core questions of the existing study of material culture on the topic: What basic landscape ideas relating to such technological

entities do each of the disputants hold, and how do they affect the general view of the public on the existing landscape? These questions consist of three layers of issues: first, they relate to the desirable image of landscape – or tacit landscape ideas (Cosgrove, 2006) that are in dispute. Second, they take into account the modern technology elements involved, a further twist in the controversy. Third, they also relate to a specific layer in a complex landscape that is disputed by different groups with varying orientations, and which a large part of the public regards with a certain level of indifference. The background of these multiple layers of issues is analysed further below.

The concept of landscape

Landscape has attracted wide-ranging academic attention; the very concept has been scrutinized for its intrinsic complexity (Bender, 1993; Tilley, 2006). Historical studies reveal the conceptual entanglements as defined in relation to land, nature, culture and law, and, finally, the visual aspect (Mels, 2003; Olwig, 1993). Carlson, a philosopher of the environment, proposes a distinction between the 'landscape as terrain' that we live in, and the 'landscape as scenery', which we see with an external gaze (Carlson, 2009; see Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988); Cosgrove (2006) adds the 'landscape idea' as being pivotal in discussing what landscape means.

The historical origin of the concept of landscape relates to the sense of unease that has accompanied the arrival of modern industrial elements. For instance, a textbook of cultural geography from the 1970s describes the 'industrial landscape' as arising only from a utilitarian perspective and, hence, as intrinsically ugly (Peters and Larkin, 1977). Meanwhile, landscape architect Ann Spirn (1986) once cautioned that her profession had dispensed with the concept of the city (see Rosenberg, 1996). The limited use of the keyword 'industry' in an otherwise comprehensive handbook on landscape (Howard et al., 2019) – occurring only in 'post-industrial landscapes' (Höfer and Vicenzotti, 2019) – is an eloquent witness of this uneasiness even today. The recent currency of 'landscape urbanism' in urban planning can be interpreted as the reflexive efforts of concerned specialists to place landscape at the centre of urban engineering as well (Carlisle and Pevzner, 2013; Smets and Shannon, 2016; Waldheim, 2006).

Yet, these new trends in the designers' domain may be vulnerable to criticism for their insufficient understanding of the historical complexity of the landscape concept outlined above (see Vicenzotti, 2017). By way of compensating for this insufficiency, a few new lines of engineering research examine the public's views on what they call 'technoscape'. In contrast with its use that signifies the global pageant of technological systems in Anglophone anthropology (Appradurai, 1990; Landzelius 2001),[2] a couple of engineering researchers in Japan have employed this term to connote the visual aspect of such technology systems. Katagi (1995) provides a detailed analysis of the complex relationship between engineers' design intentions and the public reaction to them, ranging from railway stations to high-voltage towers, around 1900 in the West. Okada (2003) focuses on the longitudinal ups and downs of the public perception of such technoscapes as Tokyo's industrial district, water gates and steel towers.[3]

A material culture approach to landscape in general, and to its modern technological elements in particular, has contributed to revealing a couple of specific characteristics of

the topic that the engineering approaches have missed so far. Aside from an emphasis on the complex entanglement of materiality and symbolism in the very concept of landscape shown above (Bender, 1993; Cosgrove, 2006; Mels, 2003; Olwig, 1993; Tilley et al., 2006), detailed case studies have been provided on modern buildings (MacDonald, 2006) and factory design (Alexander, 2000), as well as the whole urban structure (e.g. Cosgrove, 2006; Hall, 2006; Herzfeld, 2006). On the other hand, the contested aspects of the experience of landscape in relation to identity have also been emphasized (Bender, 1993; Bender and Winner, 2001; Tilley, 2006) with a specific reference to mobility, immigration and tourism (Bender, 2006; Bender and Winner, 2001; see Metro-Roland and Soica, 2019).

Through an analysis of this controversy, the previously mentioned questions have arisen, namely, on the tacit landscape ideas (Cosgrove, 2006) relating to such technological entities behind the controversy, and how they affect the general view of the public on the existing landscape. Such an approach to the questions can be answered partially in terms of the core analytical concern in the material culture approach because the very controversy duly reveals the contested focus (Bender, 2001), as well as the tacit assumptions behind the scenes in the process of disputation (see Latour, 1987; Nelkin, 1979).

Meanwhile, the present case also poses a challenge to the existing analytical framework of material culture research because it is fundamentally elusive. This elusiveness is most visible in the specific material characteristics of the topic vis-à-vis other types of technological objects in terms of their capacity for symbolization. The favoured examples of either landscape study in general or technoscape in particular are, respectively, those that relate at least in part to monuments, as in the case of archeological heritage sites (Butler, 2006; Rowlands and Tilley, 2006), or in the industrial version (Sumartodjo and Graves, 2018; Yarrow, 2018), the changing symbolism of modern buildings (MacDonald, 2006) and large-scale techno-structures (Katagi, 1995; Okada, 2003), which can be regarded as 'technologically sublime' (Nye, 1996). Inherently, the topic of this article excludes such characterizations because of their utterly ubiquitous, unflashy and ongoing nature.

The elusive nature of this subject also relates to the somewhat opaque attitude of the public on the topic, in sharp contrast to the existing emphasis on the close relationship between the contested landscape and a strong sense of identity formation (Bender, 2001; Tilley et al., 2006). This ambiguous stance of the public, however, is as important to address as the leading disputants' stances. Here we can learn from analogical research, such as the study of non-users in understanding technology–user dynamics (Oudschoorn and Pinch, 2003) or the emerging nature of the public itself vis-à-vis specific issues (Marres, 2013; see Dewey, 1927).

One of the highlights of these arguments is that the existence of the users or the public does not proceed from a concerned technology or special issue but the former takes shape in close correspondence with the latter. For the purpose of this article, Michael's (2018) argument of an 'aesthetic public' is particularly appropriate for discussing the potentially multiple ways of such an aesthetic experience of the public on the making – scientific, commercial and artistic – of the emerging nano-tech material, VANTAblack® in his own case. In this regard, the following case is a good empirical example for examining how such an aesthetic public actually emerges vis-à-vis the ongoing controversy, in contrast with Michael's more speculative way of analysing the subject.

Taking full advantage of the science and technology studies (STS) approach, however, this article does not follow some other trends of recent STS that excessively move to the material side of the topic because this article is concerned with the landscape *ideas* behind the dispute (Cosgrove, 2006; Olwig, 1993, 1996, 2019) rather than singularly focusing on the material agency (Sayes, 2014) or even ontology alone (Van Heur et al., 2012) of physical landscape. I will fully incorporate the merit of a symbolic and linguistic approach in the linguistic turn rather than following some recent academic campaign for invalidating such a turn in STS (see Pickering, 2010); I even share Olwig's (2019) incisive criticism of Heidegger and Latour on their reification of the concept of landscape as a good example of my shared stance of counter-criticism.[4]

Palimpsest, noise and *artialisation*

In order to more precisely understand the seemingly elusive and idiosyncratic characteristics of the topic, this article offers three analytical frameworks: (1) the concept of palimpsest, with specific attention to its phase of 'erasure'; (2) the concept of noise, with its diverse dimensions; and (3) the concept of *artialisation*.

Palimpsest

This concept, originally meaning a manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing is superimposed on effaced earlier writing, has attracted academic attention across diverse fields, ranging from literary criticism to urban architecture. In literary criticism, a new text superimposed on an older one provides a strong metaphor for layered intertextuality, through which Dillon (2007) traces the historical development of its metaphorical usage from De Tracy to Derrida. In landscape studies, Bender (2006) details how this concept was introduced and has gained momentum in studying the complex layers of materiality and memory in the landscape as well (e.g. Cosgrove, 2006; Hall, 2006; Vâlceanu et al., 2016).

The notion of palimpsest unites three dimensions in one: the erasure of the original text, the superimposition of new text upon it and the nebulous influence of the old with the new (Dillon, 2007). For this analysis, the first step of erasure is pivotally important because it is precisely the erasure of a particular layer of landscape that matters in the no-poles controversy. In a landscape, erasure may happen either naturally or artificially, actively or passively. The natural/artificial axis means that a part of the landscape may be erased either through natural processes, such as disasters of various kinds, or via man-made endeavours. The latter can be further divided into active erasures, like city planning, or passive ones, caused by, say, a war. In the case of poles, the act of erasure in landscape has become manifest in various ways, during both natural disasters and wars, while the very controversy relates to the positive erasure of certain layers of the existing landscape.

This said, my usage of the term palimpsest (and the related term of erasure) goes beyond the conventional academic reference to the material layeredness of either classical text or urban conditions (and its actual erasure shown above), to the extended application of the term as the analytical heuristic device as well, through which the tacit landscape ideas of the factions behind the explicit dispute are expected to be brought to

light. In other words, these terms will be used as the kind of the analytical litmus paper for discerning how far these opposing factions do deal with, or fail to do so, the 'palimpsested layeredness' of landscape as well as the meaning of erasure in such a context, in relation to their tacit landscape ideas; I will also argue that both sides of the dispute have a different stance on the 'palimpsested nature' of landscape as well as on the significance of the act of erasure, while both sides share the problem of insufficient elaboration of their claims in the face of such historical layeredness of the contested landscape.

Noise

In this exploration, the erasure phase of landscape-as-palimpsest (and its related intention to erase) is also tightly related to the concept of noise. In fact, the older text is erased because it is regarded as useless so that the new text can be superimposed. Here, I refer to useless objects in the landscape such as *noise*, a use inspired by the critics of pole-covered landscape, as well as by academic sources on the extended potential of the word. Just as there are two different ways of conceptualizing landscape – as its substantial meaning or its visual aspect (Cosgrove, 2006; Olwig, 1993) – the noise element in landscape also has such dual aspects: namely, the substantial disruption produced by the imposed entity and the visual offence it causes to the eyes of the public.

In this context, however, one potentially positive aspect of noise should also be underscored. Serres (1982) has elaborated on the notion of 'parasite', exploring its connotations from its original meaning of living off another entity and extending it to something essential in the communication system in general where parasites in the form of noise are a source of creativity as well (see Brown, 2002). The dual aspect of noise can be pivotal in understanding the poles controversy in which the opposing camps are struggling with different aspects of such noise elements in formulating their own landscape ideas.

I would add that the term noise here is largely an analytic (anthropologically, an 'etic') terminology if a few anti-poles protagonists also adopt the term in the negative sense as well. As will be soon clarified, adopting such an analytical term – principally with a negative connotation – also fits with describing the pro-pole factions' more positive stance for the disputed landscape, even if they do not use the very term, because of the underlying negative atmosphere in public, the currency of which these opponents have tried to change in a rather passive manner.

Artialisation

Another idea useful in helping to articulate this divided view is the French term *artialisation*. In parallel with an emphasis on the role of visual representation in formulating landscape ideas (Cosgrave and Daniels, 1988; Kane, 2018; Pinney, 2006), Roger (1997, 1999) formulates the concept of *artialisation*, namely of creating landscape with an artistic element both 'in situ' (applicable to the intervention of substantial landscape) and 'in visu' (for making artistic representation). I focus on his strong claim for plasticity and even optimism toward creating aesthetic value by such efforts, even for industrial elements that can easily be dismissed as negative. Although such optimism with regard to *artialising* the industrial landscape has been criticized (Ángel and Valdés, 2016), I find

the case in this article an intriguing test bed for proving how far noise in landscape can be *artialised*, as well as how much an effort of *artialisation* may affect the opaque attitude of the public, to whom those on both sides of the controversy try hard to appeal with their own causes.

Utility poles: Their technical and historical background

In his compendium of industrial techno-systems, Hayes (2014: 271–276) spends a few pages on 'utility poles' in the chapter on the power grid:

> Most distributions are carried out on wood poles, which have thus become one of the common sights on the modern roadside and streetscape. In North America there are 100 million of them – almost as many as there are houses or cars. Yet we seldom notice them. (p. 272)

Utility poles usually consist of the poles themselves, the electric wires, pole-mounted transformers, street-lighting fixtures, and so on. These poles had once been ubiquitously used at the time of the development of the electric system, along with the network of telegraph poles with a slightly different outlook. The idea of burying these poles and wires underground was carried out in the US and some parts of Europe at the end of the 19th century: in New York, for instance, overhead lines were outlawed following the blizzard of 1888, likewise in Los Angeles in 1896 (Hayes, 2014). In other parts of the world, in the rural areas of advanced countries as well as other developing countries, landscapes with these poles are not particularly new.

The Japanese landscapes with these poles have grown steadily since the time of its industrialization, with a couple of interruptions made by the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 in the city areas and by World War II throughout the country. In prewar times, their unsightliness was occasionally mentioned alongside the general problem of urban hygiene and ubiquitous advertisements in public spaces around the 1930s and 40s by urban planners (Arita and Nakai, 2015). After the war, these poles radically proliferated again because tolerating these poles was both cheaper and technically easier than establishing an underground network (Iwata, 2014).[5] Nowadays, almost every corner of Japanese society is characterized by forests of these poles and wires with only a few exceptions of municipal efforts to bury them underground.

The official height of these poles ranges from 10m to 16m while the spaces between them vary from 5m to longer, depending on local need. For the past 60 years, they have been made from concrete, subsequent to the days of wooden poles,[6] with colours ranging from grey to silver to chocolate. These poles are often equipped with road signs, traffic mirrors, addresses and even various types of posters and advertisements.

Background of the controversy

The recent controversy over these poles and wires has been raised by a number of different groups with different orientations, though there is some commonality in their backgrounds vis-à-vis concerns with the substantial and visual aspects of landscape (Cosgrove, 2006; Olwig, 1993). One substantial concern relates to safety in a time of natural

disaster, as represented by Kumiko Koike, the controversial Mayor of Tokyo, who is one of the principal advocates of the no-poles campaign. She witnessed the Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake in 1995, which resulted in more than 6,000 casualties, along with a sea of fallen poles and wires on the ground; the disaster prompted her to stress the need to get rid of them for safety reasons (Koike and Matsubara, 2015). Anticipation of further earthquakes in metropolitan areas is one of the major rhetorical strategies the government uses, as seen in MLIT's official homepage.[7]

This argument, however, is not without counter-argument. Electric companies refer to the astronomical cost of eliminating these poles to put them underground because such poles are economical, as the name 'temporary poles' suggests (Adachi and Inoue, 2011). The economic aspect extends to issues of maintenance and repair (Denis et al., 2016; Graham and Thrift, 2007): once these wires are buried underground, it becomes more difficult both to maintain and repair them when there is a problem (see Hayes, 2014, for a similar argument in the US).

Parallel to the safety issues, concerns relating to the visual landscape have gradually become manifest in the policy agenda of the government. One such achievement is the enactment of the Landscape Law in 2004.[8] Though the issue of *keikan* (landscape) was seminally referred to in prewar legislation, for example the Urban Planning Law in 1919 (Arita and Nakai, 2015), commentators point out that, before the law in 2004, public policy on landscape was confined principally to the efforts of each municipality without clear legal authority (Fukuzawa, 2005; Hayashi, 2004).

The logic of the no-poles campaign

Varying responses to the landscape issue have been inevitably related to the different groups of campaigners with their differing orientations but, among them, the most systematic effort has been promoted by the No-Poles Network (2010) as mentioned above, a representative NPO group that advocates for a policy of burying these poles and wires underground, whose members include a media-friendly economist, architects, construction and tourism companies, and local government officials. They have acquired various allies for their campaign, such as the Tokyo municipal government as well as MLIT, which is in charge of both tourism and infrastructure.

Recent policy momentum has been gained as well through tourism concerns, a favourite field in which contested landscape is important because people travel for pleasure (Bender, 2001, 2006; Metro-Roland and Soica, 2019). Most notable is the International Olympic Committee's decision to make Tokyo the next Olympic site. This has accelerated the government's campaign to 'beautify Japan' to make it a major tourist destination. This mounting concern with tourism policy inevitably orients policy makers to the voiced frustration of foreign visitors to such tourist sites as Kyoto, which is covered by these poles and wires as well (e.g. No-Poles Network, 2010). A think-tank of JTB, one of the most influential tourist companies in Japan, has provided a set of social research outcomes from the impact of possible no-poles policy in the major tourist sites in Japan (Nakane, nd).

Such an external view that regards the existing landscape as scenery (Carlson, 2009; see Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988) resonates with criticism from a foreign academic who

has lived in Japan for a long time: Eric Kerr, a researcher of Japanese traditional culture, has condemned the Japanese contemporary landscape as contaminated with colourful posters, public ads, rivers covered with ferro-concrete blocks against flood and so on, and in which utility poles are legitimate targets for criticism (Kerr, 2014).

Travelling experience also matters for Ryuchiro Matsubara, one of the founding members of the No-Poles Network. He remembers his awareness of the annoying nature of these poles-covered landscapes in 1980 when he visited Paris and had a strange feeling of uneasiness. Later, back home, he realized that this feeling was caused by the absence of the utility poles in Parisian street views (Koike and Matsubara, 2015). Hence, in his first book as a comprehensive criticism on the landscape policy in post-war Japan (Matsubara, 2002), one chapter was dedicated to the programme of burying utility poles underground, exploring the case of his own residential area in Tokyo.

Counter-criticisms

The discussion over the unsightliness of pole-covered landscapes has raised a number of reactions from diverse sources, including academics, artists, and even a small part of the public. Though described as a controversy, the counter-arguments have been rather more sporadic and less visible than the more organized ways of the various no-poles campaigners mentioned above. However, some intriguing points have been raised on the weakness of the no-poles arguments. One such weakness is the polemicists' tacit landscape idea (Cosgrove, 2006) in which the opponents look into seemingly uncritical acceptance of the 'Western' ideal on the topic. Matsubara, who wrote about his visit to Paris as mentioned above (Koike and Matsubara, 2015), and other authors who routinely cite cases in old cities in the West (No-Poles Network, 2010; Kerr, 2014) are vulnerable to this kind of counter-criticism.

This type of criticism may have its academic prototype in Barry Shelton's (1999) seminal 'culturalist' argument on the uniqueness of the Japanese landscape – though not directly involved in the ongoing polemics. Often characterized as messy and confused, Shelton claims that such alleged messiness should be understood from its own unique cognitive, cultural, and even aesthetic principles, which he believes manifest themselves in the wide range of cultural representation, from the use of ideograms to the address system based upon geographical blocks.

In contrast, Goro Igarashi, an historian of architecture, is more outspoken in his criticism of these no-poles arguments based upon the aesthetics favouring the prototype of old Western cities. Rather, he argues in favour of the aesthetic potential of an industrial technoscape, such as the Metropolitan Express Highway over Nihonbashi, the centre of old Edo (Tokyo) (Igarashi, 2006). Though not participating in this controversy, the technoscape arguments above (Katagi, 1995; Okada, 2003) share a similar interest in the aesthetic potential of such industrial technoscapes.

Matsubara's second book reveals that these counter-criticisms made him somewhat defensive, his excuse being that he is not at all West-centric and is well aware of the alternative attractiveness of non-Western urban landscapes, like that of Hong Kong city. He was even forced to confine his no-poles arguments to traditional tourist sites and residential areas (Koike and Matsubara, 2015). He fights back, however, by criticizing the

indifference of both intellectuals and the general public towards such unsightliness, calling these poles 'white noise', by which he attributes noise to the landscape but at a tolerable level, falling short of provoking annoyance. He also likens it to a disease, *densen-byô* (electric wires disease), a pun on the ordinary *densen-byô* (contagious disease). He hypothesizes that there is a ghostly ideological entity that hinders the public from perceiving such environmental noise (Koike and Matsubara, 2015).

A meagre genealogy of elusive iconography

In contrast to academic counter-arguments, the genealogy of more positive *artialisation* (Roger, 1997) of such technoscape has scarcely been visible, whether in iconography (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988) or other artistic media, until very recently with the advent of some powerful advocates. In prewar times, though a few artists and photographers depicted some of the industrialization of Japan (Okada, 2003), specific reference was hardly made to these poles, with one writer being a notable exception: Kenji Miyazawa, a nationally known poet who composed dozens of fantastical poems and stories in the 1920s and 30s. He wrote a short story about a young boy who, walking in the moonlight, encountered a group of (telegraph) poles marching together as a corps and he had a surrealistic conversation with them (Miyazawa, 2009).[9] This story is often interpreted as presenting Miyazawa's sense of fascination with the rapidly developing modernity in 1930s Japan (Ando, 1986; Ohtsuka, 1993).

In the postwar period, such references to the fragments of technoscape are a mixture of diverse perspectives, not confined to pole-covered landscape. *Toshi Kansatsu Gakkai* (The Urban Observation Society), an avant-garde art movement established in 1986 and led by artist Genpei Akasegawa, paid close attention to urban technological surfaces that look odd, such as a door in an old building that does not open, some ghostly shadows on the wall of a building that look like after-images of the nuclear blasts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and so on (Akasegawa, 2010). Such artistic curiosity about the urban surface, inspired by surrealism and Dadaism in the West, has a dim resonance with the more recent attempt at *artialising* the pole-covered landscape.

In contrast, the ubiquitous and anonymous character of these poles has been highlighted by Minoru Betsuyaku, a well-known playwright whose Samuel Becket-inspired minimalist stage settings ordinarily use such a utility pole along with other small items such as a bench, where the pole symbolizes the inconspicuousness of everyday urban life that is both nowhere and everywhere (Uchida, 2018)

Utility-pole aesthetics

In contrast with this rather ghostly genealogy of *artialisation*, Hideaki Anno, a film director, has maximally explored the aesthetic potential of these poles and wires in his works, with his blatant claim for the aesthetics of such pole-covered landscapes. Anno is a globally known animator for a couple of blockbusters in both TV and films, among which the best-known is his TV series, and his subsequent movies are titled *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, an epic saga about a mythic future of humanity under attack by monstrous

entities he calls 'angels', televised in 1995 and later (Kaburagi, 1997; Project Team, 2009).[10]

Regarding the importance of iconography in formulating landscape ideas (Cosgrove, 2006; Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988) or *artialisation* (Roger, 1997), the audience of Anno's animation works immediately comprehends the detailed depiction of such technoscapes involving utility poles, wires and high voltage towers in his works, in sharp contrast to the more conventional way of simply omitting these items or using symbols in their place. Ryusuke Hikawa, a film critic, explains that Anno elects to put these elements in the fore front, focusing on their hidden life and history in his sagas.[11]

Anno has been becoming more outspoken in recent years in defence of the beauty of these poles, probably in response to the no-poles campaign that has become publicly visible. As he said in an interview conducted in 2000:

> As I grew up close to a factory, it was my archetypal image. Even now I love such things as factories and masses of iron. I love also utility poles; especially their *functional beauty* (*kinô-bi*). I know there's a movement in political circles to remove these poles. I wonder what motivates them to further impoverish the urban landscape, which has already been so boring. There would be no charm of landscape in Tokyo without utility poles. (emphasis added)[12]

On another occasion, he reiterates the concept of the functional beauty of these poles:

> Utility poles have only functional beauty (*kinô-bi*). Their concise form exists as uniformity in every city . . . The disinterestedness of such poles, without any compromise to the general landscape, is something that I adore that is irreplaceable with other things.[13]

In parallel with Anno's unique support of the poles' beauty with his poetic depiction of them in his works, on a Japanese photographic SNS site called *Ingrum* there is a page dedicated to photos of utility poles with those that are clearly reminiscent of the scenes in Anno's *Evangelion*, whose number had reached 107,147 as of late 2018, and the number is still growing.[14] *Pixiv*, another Japanese SNS site for both professional and amateur graphics writers, has a specific category of drawings for utility poles.[15] There is even a site for the best drawings of utility-pole related landscapes, with a caption referring to the 'inorganic beauty of electric wires', which says, 'we find these poles everywhere outside, while usually we don't pay attention to them. Once, however, we attend to them, we are captured by their functional, inorganic beauty.'[16] In what is called the *Pixiv-Encyclopedia*, the entry for utility poles is defined as 'something nostalgic for the Japanese, while their number is decreasing due to the policy of burying them underground'.[17]

Related to such efforts to reappraise the aesthetic value of these poles on the web, there is a site on the web that collects critical comments on the very picture of Mt Fuji covered with utility poles in the photography competition for a No-Poles Landscape mentioned above. There are quite a few comments that underscore that the utility poles that cover the Mt Fuji print actually *enhance* the beauty of the scenery in the context of modern technology.[18]

Ken Ohyama, author of a photo-book on factories (Ohyama, 2007), takes issue with the very assumption behind the photo contest itself – as Igarashi (2006) did – that there is no situation where the factory might look good if it were without these poles, simply chosen from the standpoint of an idyllic view of the traditional landscape, and not from that of the industrial era. Hence, Ohyama believes that this contest is based upon a tautology: 'when asked "Why not a landscape with poles", the answer would be, "Because a good landscape has no utility poles!"'[19]

Discussion

In terms of the entanglement of a disputed issue with the emerging (aesthetic) public (Michael, 2018), the topic of this article is a good example for observing how such a potential public may actually emerge in concrete form vis-à-vis the ongoing controversy, if such a relation cannot be reduced to one-to-one correspondence between them. In parallel with the three aspects of landscape, namely its substantial, visual and conceptual aspects (Cosgrove, 2006; Olwig, 1993), the controversy has been fought both on the issue of safety as part of a substantial landscape and unsightliness as a visual landscape among the diverse factions that differ and overlap in a rather complex manner.

The analytical concepts proposed in this article, namely, palimpsest and erasure, noise and *artisalisation* have produced different outcomes when applied to different aspects of the controversy; in terms of substantial landscape, the act of erasure seems to be rather directly applicable to the historical dynamics of such wire-covered landscape, seen in the repeated obliteration of land surfaces from both natural disasters (e.g. earthquakes) and man-made catastrophes like war. Hence, the inscription of new landscape elements after such erasures have occurred rather frequently, historically, where the safety issue of pole-covered landscapes has come to the fore in recent years. The need to erase the noise elements in safety issues in a time of disaster is not difficult for the anti-pole factions to claim, by way of exhibiting the pictures of the fallen poles at the time of disaster (Koike and Matsubara, 2015) while the opponents may claim, with a rather inconspicuous voice, that poles may have merit in terms of rapid recovery and easy repair compared with underground wires (see Adachi and Inoue, 2011).

In contrast with the way the controversy is fought on the safety issue, the dispute over its visual aspect – the main topic of this article – is more complex and even asymmetrical in terms of landscape as palimpsest, noise and its erasure. For the no-poles polemicists, the concept of noise and its required erasure is part of their major ideological armory. The undesirability of the visual noise of the poles and wires seems to be so obvious to the no-poles campaigners that it appears to be even a mystery to them how such a large part of the public appears to be relatively indifferent (Matsubara, 2002). As noted above, this is why Matsubara has adopted the terms 'white noise' and *densen-byô* (electric wires disease) on his own account. Such relative indifference of the public can also be evidenced in inhabitants' occasional opposition to the actual operations of burying the wires underground, as electric companies testify (Koike and Matsubara, 2015). A well-known photographer recently described such a situation as 'public awareness being blocked from landscape'.[20] Rather than ascribe to the notion of 'disease', I prefer the following observation from some concerned real estate appraisers: 'the urban landscape with poles

Figure 2. Poles at night. © Photograph: Masato Fukushima.

and wires has become just like an archetypical image (*gen-fûkei*) for the Japanese who were born and have grown up in the cities' (Adachi and Inoue, 2011: 27).

Against this background, the no-poles campaigners need to introduce an external gaze to the public that will highlight the present problem of landscape as scenery, along with their own versions of *artialisation* efforts like the photography competition referred to above. All of this is related to the topic of travelling, tourism and visitors' perspectives, as well, with a pivotal focus on the material culture approach to landscape (Bender, 2006; Bender and Winner, 2001; see Metro-Roland and Soica, 2019).

The very problem of such an idea of erasure for no-poles campaigners is primarily because the poles are thoroughly embedded through their multi-functionality in serving as street lights, traffic signposts and a place to advertise (see Figure 2). Although erasing this layer of landscape is not impossible, alternatives will need to be found for these diverse functions. For instance, the street lights would need new poles without wires and, preferably, from the polemicists' view, would be set up in some kind of geometrical order, à la quasi-Haussmanian ideal of sanitary visibility (see Herzfeld, 2006; Rubio and Fogue, 2013).

Yet, other elements would remain, such as traffic lights, antennas on rooftops and various posters and advertisements, to say nothing of the very houses and buildings, which are not always built in such an orderly spatial arrangement. Visual noise, after all,

is not confined to this layer of poles and wires but also characterizes the visual landscape in general (see Kerr, 2014). On this point, the no-poles approach appears to be more pragmatic than theoretically consistent, lacking thoroughness in policy as compared to, say, the more extreme 'spatial cleansing' proposed in some cities abroad to create empty fields by getting rid of messy market elements (Herzfeld, 2006). Thus, the practical applicability of erasure policy is most effective in traditionally preserved quarters, which are built in an orderly manner and, hence, are already good resources for tourism. Otherwise, as Shelton (1999) claims, this seemingly noisy appearance has multiple layers, each of which has cultural connotations beneath the surface (see Olwig, 1993).

Second, in relation to this, as Igarashi's (2006) previous criticism indicates, this erasure idea presupposes the tacit negation of the legacy of modern industry as the proper elements of contemporary landscape (landscape as palimpsest in my term). I would add that such a negative atmosphere seems to be relatively shared among certain policy makers, which is evidenced by another policy campaign of burying the Metropolitan Expressway underground to restore the traditional Nihon-bashi (Japan Bridge) in the centre of Tokyo; this Metropolitan Expressway was once a symbol of the rapid economic recovery of Japan (Igarashi, 2006) and it was featured by Andrei Tarkovsky as a background for his film, *Solaris*, in order to visualize the future world (Suzuki, 2019).

Compared with the no-poles campaigners, the pro-poles faction seems to be more positive with such industrial layers of the landscape, which I interpret as more sensitive to the specific layers of landscape as palimpsest, while their claim vis-à-vis that of their opponents is a little asymmetrical on the issue of poles and wires. First, while some of the no-poles campaigners have explicitly adopted the term 'noise' in discussing the nature of such a technological entity, the pro-poles campaigners have not explicitly adopted such a term, nor have they advocated a more positive term for describing the visual values of such scenery. In fact, the online discussion of the pro-poles faction should be regarded as the *reaction* to the no-poles campaign rather than the former who have praised the value of such pole-covered views from the outset. This is in fact in contrast with Kenji Miyazawa's poetic appraisal of these telegraph poles in pre-war times (Ando, 1986; Ohtsuka, 1993) or with Minoru Betsuyaku's symbolic presentation of these poles for his minimalist theatre mentioned above (Uchida, 2018). Besides, so far there have been no books published on the aesthetics of such pole-covered landscapes but the discussions have been largely confined to those on the web, in sharp contrast with the mushrooming publication of books on the aesthetics of the other infrastructural entities such as books on water towers (Hiruma, 2015; Ogawa, 2018), factory views (Ohyama, 2007), and high voltage towers (Hyodo and Komatsu, 1999).

These facts leave us with the impression that that their stance is more like that of sporadic guerillas rather than the regular army, being well aware that their views are those of the minority. I have interpreted their stance as tacitly admitting the noise status of these poles and wires, while trying to invert such negative value to positive in a rather amusing manner, just as Serres (1982) tried to invert the meaning of noise from negative to positive. Such minority consciousness can also be observed in their general lack of efforts for more active mobilization of followers to change the policy of erasing poles from the landscape, but their efforts have been confined to online argument or sporadic criticism like that of Anno et al. (2009) mentioned above.

Intriguing here, however, is that their claim, which no-poles campaigners may regard as somewhat eccentric, has gained support from a small sector of society, in part probably because of a successful *artialisation* strategy from Anno, owing to his overwhelming popularity. It is impressive that even a landscape noise element like poles and wires can actually be positively *artialised* (Roger, 1997), despite criticism concerning the limits of such *artialisation* as applied to the industrial landscape (Ángel and Valdés, 2016).

In spite of some success, however, I would argue that their counter-argument is far from even providing a workable alternative landscape idea to their opponents' motif of simply erasing the noise element in the present landscape. Aside from all these guerilla strategies described above, the limitation of the pro-poles minority lies in their narrow focus on the particular technological elements themselves (see Igarashi, 2006; Ohyama, 2007) rather than stepping back to consider the whole palimpsest of landscape, which involves, say, the more traditional sectors as well. This may be most visible in Anno et al.'s (2009) somewhat eccentric appraisal of each pole as standing 'without any compromise to the general landscape' above, an eloquent witness that Anno does not much care about the cacophony created between this specific technoscape and the other layers of landscape. Using palimpsest-related terminologies, it can be dubbed as the superimposition without erasure that on one hand provides the valuable gaze to the specific layers of historicity of landscape (namely the industrial layer), while on the other provides little further argument or proposal on how such a layer may co-exist with other layers of landscape-as-palimpsest – this issue indeed lies at the very heart of the criticism of the no-poles campaigners. I suspect that the former after all never go beyond confessing that they are fond of a variety of industrial landscape, and poles and wires are part of it. Naturally, this stance is far from persuading their opponents, involving policy makers, that they should provide a landscape idea inclusive of whole layers of palimpsest.

Ironically, this insufficiency is manifest in a recent policy from MLIT for making some industrial landscape features – such as dams, bridges and so on – into new tourist destinations with the neologism of *infura tsûrizumu* (infrastructure tourism). In order to raise public interest, the Ministry instituted another photograph competition to solicit good photos of local infrastructures.[21] An obvious ambivalence lies here, in that while promoting such tourism as industrial heritage (see Butler, 2006; Carlson, 2009; Rowlands and Tilley, 2006), the same MLIT – although through a different division – is also promoting the policy of erasing utility poles with the excuse that they annoy foreign visitors.

Such ambivalence is an eloquent witness to the limits of *artialising* these poles that lacks sublimity or even visible monumentality; their quasi-ubiquitous, inconspicuous characteristics seem to linger at the margin of such efforts, whether positive or negative – that is, largely in a state of dormancy. At best, they may become a lukewarm symbol of our everyday sociotechnical life, where Betsuyaku's stage settings, mentioned earlier (Uchida, 2018), have astutely explored their symbolic value.

Conclusion

This article has tried to unearth the landscape idea (Cosgrove, 2006; Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988) lurking behind the controversy currently fought on modern technological entities like electric poles and wires in landscapes, almost ubiquitous in Japan and still in

use in a large part of the world (Hayes, 2014). The existing arguments on landscape are tightly entangled with its substantial, visual and art-related aspects (Cosgrove, 2006; Olwig, 1993; Roger, 1997), and the controversy on the topic has been observed to co-emerge with diverse kinds of concerned public (Marres, 2013; Michael, 2018). This article adopted three analytical frameworks, namely palimpsest (erasure) (Bender, 2006; Dillon, 2007), noise (Serres, 1982) and *artialisation* (Roger, 1997), by means of which my analysis has shown that, through these analytical frameworks, I have clarified the somewhat asymmetrical relationship between the stances of the two sides of the controversy, where each exhibits serious flaws in fully assessing the meaning of the historically layered nature of our contemporary landscape as a whole.

Most intriguing in this controversy is understanding how the public perceive technoscape, namely the visual aesthetics of contemporary entities like urban infrastructures (Katagi, 1995; Okada, 2003). The concept of palimpsest and its related sub-concepts that material culture studies have long nurtured (Bender, 2006; Cosgrove, 2006; Hall, 2006) are particularly productive in underscoring the tight entanglements between textuality and materiality in the observed surface at large and in this case in particular. I find the palimpsest concept even more suggestive in revealing the pivotal significance of the accumulated traces of historicity and its related dynamism of erasure, superimposition, and so on of both text and materiality than, say, a kin concept like assemblage (see Latour, 2007), widely in currency in STS and elsewhere as the temporary gathering of human and non-human entities.

Against such theoretical reflections, poles and wires in landscape provide an intriguing enigma: despite the various efforts of policy makers and NGOs, which include a recent *haiku* contest for a no-poles landscape in my district, poles and wires still seem to prosper, owing to the recent boom of redevelopment in the suburban areas of the metropolis. Soon after old houses are torn down to make an empty field, new poles grow in number, to be connected with various wires, like the ecological cycle of forestry. In a TV programme that features foreigners living in Japan for a long time, an American woman who works in a rural city has just returned from her native country and is asked about the pole-covered view in the street. She may have encapsulated the general Japanese perspective on poles in her answer: 'I feel I am coming back to Japan!'

In terms of landscape, poles and wires pose an odd situation because they are not confined to specific sites or localities, not even to cities: they have long been and are still used worldwide as part of the system of modern technology (Hayes, 2014). Hence, their most visible manifestation of locality is the choice between burying them underground or letting them stay on the surface. Because of their quasi-ubiquitous nature, it is tempting to think of them as just another part of the paraphernalia of modernity, like junkspace (Koolhaas, 2004) or non-places (Augé, 1995); as the controversy above shows, however, these poles indeed have a complex stance in the palimpsest of landscape where they are revealed to be Janus-like: they may be regarded as visually negative noise to be erased, or as amicably individual with a capacity for being appreciated for their potential beauty. Hence, it is tempting to imagine a sort of technological spectrum – in the context of the aesthetics issue in visual landscape and its related public on the making – with utterly unnoticeable objects like electrical sockets (Taylor, 2014) at one end that are too trivial in an aesthetics gaze, and monumental techno-structures that may possess a sense of

sublimity at the other, which have long elicited active academic argument in terms of technological sublimity (Nye, 1996) and technoscape (Katagi, 1995; Okada, 2003).

Situated in the middle of such a spectrum – just like the other diverse range of technological entities such as entangled wires behind an internet server, dark and dull walls of a subway station, traffic signposts and so on – the poles controversy provides an intriguing insight into understanding the dynamism of how different senses of landscape emerge and proliferate, even including the unflashy modern technological objects in existence almost everywhere around us, just like modernity itself.

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Notes

1. More precisely, *Mudenchûka-minkanpurojekuto* (The Nongovernmental Project for No-Poles), http://mudenchuka.jp/contest/ (accessed 18 October 2017).
2. Along with the similar term 'technological landscape' in the sociology of technology, with its somewhat more restricted connotation (Rip and Kemp, 1998).
3. Diverse sources touch upon the topic, though not with concerns similar to mine: these include a visual compendium of the industrial techno-system in the US (Hayes, 2014), a review on the topic in the context of the Global South (Larkin, 2013) and an historical analysis of the cultural effect of such a large technology system on American minds (Nye, 1996). Some of these will be touched upon later.
4. More precisely, Olwig's (2019) criticism is targeted at Latour's (2004) failure in fully developing his historical analysis of a 'thing' concept as the interface of materiality and human gathering, which ended up by tacitly reintroducing the reified notion of thing in modern times. See also Fukushima (2005).
5. Ironically, this was enabled by improvements in coating the electric wire itself so it wouldn't be exposed to the public. In other countries, the lack of such a technique forced them to be buried underground (No-Poles Network, 2010).
6. See: http://ba.chuden.jp/assets/pdf/vol22_qa.pdf (accessed 19 August 2018).
7. See: .http://www.mlit.go.jp/road/road/traffic/chicyuka/ (accessed 8 April 2016)
8. Here, attention should be paid to the fact that the Japanese word *keikan* refers only to the visual landscape without connoting its substantial version (see Olwig, 1993, 1996).
9. There is a slight difference between *denshin-bashira* (telegraph poles) and *denchû* (utility poles) in purpose and shape. In recent years, the latter word usually refers to all such poles generally.

10. Recently his fame has been raised again by his radical and innovative reinterpretation of the Godzilla film, *Shin-Godzilla*, a blockbuster released in 2016.
11. See: http://anime.eiga.com/tiff/column/index.html (accessed 3 April 2017).
12. See: http://news.livedoor.com/article/detail/9406344/ (accessed 3 April 2017). This quote, as well as the following direct citations from Japanese sources, are all my translations.
13. See: http://www.toyota.co.jp/jpn/tech/personal_mobility/take_your_city/no1/ (accessed 17 December 2017).
14. See: http://www.imgrum.org/tag/%E3%82%A8%E3%83%B4%E3%82%A1%E3%81%BD%E3%81%84 (accessed 28 October 2018).
15. See: https://www.pixiv.net/search.php?s_mode=s_tag&word=%E9%9B%BB%E6%9F%B1 (accessed 5 January 2018).
16. See: https://www.pixivision.net/ja/a/573 (accessed 5 January 2018).
17. See: https://dic.pixiv.net/a/%E9%9B%BB%E6%9F%B1 (accessed 5 January 2018).
18. See: https://togetter.com/li/770247 (accessed 18 October 2017).
19. See note 18.
20. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 15 October 2018, p. 11.
21. See: https://www.facebook.com/mlit.infratourism/ (accessed 10 October 2017).

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