

# THE AESTHETICS OF MISERY: AN INTERPRETATION AND COMPARATION IN CONTEMPORARY INTERIOR DESIGN

## *ESTETIKA PENDERITAAN: INTERPRETASI DAN PERBANDINGAN DALAM DESAIN INTERIOR KONTEMPORER*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses symbolic interior design and contemporary which are relevant to the experimental work called Aesthetics of Misery presented at the Milan Furniture Fair in April 2015. The exhibition presented sixteen works by students of the Interior Design Postgraduate Program at Politecnico di Milano Italia. This new approach to design was launched by Andrea Branzi and Michele de Lucchi, the two main designers at Milan. Viewed from aesthetics, the works on display have symbolic aesthetic elements. The works display a "social environment" based on the concept of suffering. Descriptive analysis method is used to explain the background and aesthetic goals of suffering. Observation in contemporary interior design is used as an interpretation of this concept as well as a comparative study. The aim is to find an implementation that what Andre Branzi and Michele de Lucchi call an aesthetic of suffering in various approaches and design styles, already in contemporary interior design work. The results showed that in an indirect form, the concept of misery in various approaches and design styles is existed or represented in industrial-style interior design work which in addition to using old factory-nuanced materials, symbolically showed the element of suffering.

**Keywords:** aesthetics, aesthetics of misery, social environment, interior design

### ABSTRAK

*Paper ini membahas karya eksperimental yang disebut Aesthetics of Misery (Estetika Penderitaan) yang dipresentasikan di Milan Furniture Fair pada bulan April 2015. Pameran ini menampilkan enam belas karya mahasiswa Program Pascasarjana Desain Interior Politecnico di Milano Italia yang digagas oleh Andrea Branzi dan Michele de Lucchi, dua desainer utama di Milan. Selain membahas konsep dan interpretasi Aesthetics of Misery, dalam paper ini juga dilakukan studi banding dengan fenomena dalam desain interior kontemporer. Metode analisis deskriptif dipakai untuk menjelaskan latar belakang dan tujuan. Observasi dalam desain interior dipakai sebagai interpretasi konsep ini sekaligus sebagai studi banding dengan konsep the Aesthetic of Misery. Tujuannya untuk menemukan implementasi bahwa sesuatu yang Andre Branzi dan Michele de Lucchi sebut sebagai Estetika Penderitaan dalam berbagai pendekatan dan gaya desain, telah ada dalam karya desain interior. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa dalam bentuk tidak langsung, konsep penderitaan dalam berbagai pendekatan dan gaya desain ada atau direpresentasikan dalam karya desain interior gaya industrial yang selain menggunakan material bermuansa pabrik tua, secara simbolik menunjukkan unsur penderitaan.*

**Kata Kunci:** estetika, estetika penderitaan, lingkungan sosial, desain interior

### INTRODUCTION

In the world of design, generally, aesthetics is only seen or understood as everything which is beautiful. It is common that design is normally dedicated to the art of beautifying objects and structures (Barba-Court, 2017). Although design talks about functional problem, in the end, designers always strive to produce aesthetically beautiful works. It is clear that misery, for most people and visual matter, is not a part of the design. Most of us believe that misery is an object that must be removed

or hidden for the sake of beauty and for the sake of pleasurable objects.

In a broader context of art, such as painting, movie, or literature, in addition to joyous things, there are also impressions of misery. In literature, for example, the best-seller novel *Laskar Pelangi* by Andrea Hirata which was transformed into a movie tells about the misery of a child growing up in Belitung. The child struggles to face the problem of his life, but then he can reach his dream to study in UK and is considered be successful person. We can also see the

existence of misery in other movie; *Slumdog Millionaire*, for example. In this movie, misery becomes the first and main setting of the story in which the character struggles along the flow of the movie until he reaches his destiny. In movie or literature, misery or suffering is not merely about poverty but it is also about other life issues, such as conflicts in family, friends, love and so on. If the main character successfully solves the problem, it is a happy ending story.

Misery is often expressed in art, but it is not common in design. However, painting and photography in various themes including tribulations or misery are the property of interior design as painting and photography are usually hung on the walls to beautify the rooms. Among the paintings which contain the concept of misery are Jeihan's paintings with his trademark female figure with dark eyes and Van Gogh's work entitling *a pair of shoes*. The two paintings mentioned above reflects life with suffering or misery. The paintings are presented in the room with beautiful interior design and filled with beautiful furniture. On the other hand, photography sometimes contains misery. The art of photography also displays the images that are often called "human interest" category in which it shows the reality of life often containing misery. In addition, Cinemas which are designed with beautiful interior design also contain misery since the movie shows not only a happy story, but also misery, such as about World War. Misery, as visual object, exists in the reality of life and becomes a part of our daily life.

In the opening ceremony of Cumulus Conference at the Design Museum Milan, on June 2015, there was a talk show session with Michele de Lucchi about what he and Andrea Branzi –the prominent Italian designer–, had created. They called it the aesthetics of misery. de Lucchi argued that misery exists in art such as movie, painting, and literature. However, in interior design, misery seems to be something that should be avoided or eliminated. His idea is to bring the art of mise-

ry into design field as a reality in life, so that it can also exist in the interior design. From those view, misery is a part of our life.

The latest work of Michele De Lucchi was *Zero Pavilun* in Milan World Expo 2015 (Lusiardi, 2017). Meanwhile, Andrea Branzi himself was a co-founder of Domus Academy, the first international graduate design school. They are responsible for this experimental works of the new approach on aesthetics. They call it the *aesthetics of misery*. "Aesthetics of Misery" was born as a result of an experimental workshop by the first-year master students of interior design at the Politecnico di Milano. The workshop was overseen by Francesca Balena Arista and Marco De Santi in which students were asked to take on the theme of misery, which is always excluded from aesthetics design (Stratford, 2016). The works were presented in Milan's 2015 Salone del Mobile consisting of sixteen 'social scenario' maquettes which were built based on the concept of "misery that originates from poverty", under the discerning guidance of curators Andrea Branzi and Michele de Lucchi (Barba-Court, 2016).

## METHOD

The purpose of this paper is to find out the works of interior design that have similar concept expressing the misery. To achieve this purpose, we used the comparative study between the works of Michele De Lucchi and Andrea Branzi with the works of some contemporary interior design called industrial style. The reason of choosing the industrial style in interior design is based on the visual interpretation that aesthetic misery and industrial style interior design in some extent have similar visual characteristics. From a random observation toward some commercials of interior design, such as cafes in the city of Bandung, it seems that the industrial style is a new trend in the present day. Analytical description was made to the works of some industrial style interior design consisting of the similar idea with the aesthetics of misery. Due to the lack of the author's understanding of the concept of the

aesthetic of misery coming from the opening ceremony of the Cumulus Conference in Milan Museum Design, June 2015, where Michele de Lucchi and Andrea Branzi presented their concepts of aesthetic of misery, the author searched for supplementary materials from the internet, especially design media.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### The Concept of Aesthetics of Misery

According to Michele De Lucchi, design is not the only practical discipline. It is a discipline that touches all the questions we have on our minds today (Engelen, 2015). De Lucchi explains that the aesthetics of misery talks about hardship. Hardship tells us about something which is more than simply the lack of something because hardship is not a lack of something. Hardship knows how to respond to our needs, certainly a low one but a very particular one in our existence. For De Lucchi, misery is not a disease but a condition that also belongs to reality. He also mentions that misery is not to be meant in a negative sense. It is the simplicity of living with “less” in a world that likes to have more (Engelen, 2015).

The works showing the slums, refugee camps, favelas, abandoned theaters, and bombed-out shelters are some of the realistic spaces crafted by the students, filled with minute and powerful details which punctuate the deprivation and pover-

ty on each scale model, a truly compelling subject, a contrast from the beauty and lavishness demanded by today’s design culture.

Andrea Branzi argues that these experimental works investigate the concept of deprivation and re-establishment of its value as a historical and cultural category or crucial relevance which generate both misery and nobility. The models convey decadence, uncertainty, and decrepitude through an extreme, sometimes brutal, digged from urban social realism. Everything is covered by a merciless veil of dirt: mud, dust, and soot (Editor Azure, 2015). As a tribute to those who struggle in their lives to be upright as human beings, in their own way, with the aesthetics they feel, they create works for their shelter.

In different condition but having connection in a wider context, the term misery arises in the condition of our age by the lead of cultural theorist and philosopher Bernard Stiegler who reexamines the relationship between politics and aesthetics in contemporary hyperindustrial age, in a book entitling *Symbolic of Misery* (Fitzpatrick, 2014). Stiegler argues that our age is characterized by the seizure of the symbol by industrial technology, where aesthetics has become both theatre and weapon in the economic war. This has resulted in a ‘symbolic misery’ where conditioning substitutes for experience. In today’s control societies, aesthetic weapons play an essential role.

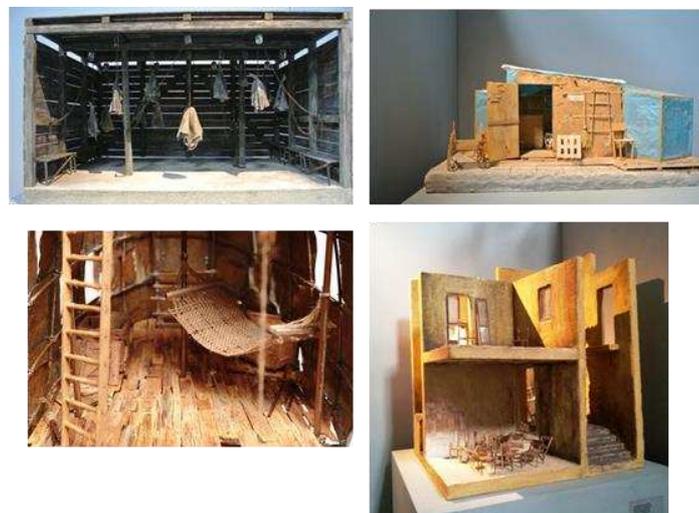


Figure 1 Some Maquettes Made by Master-program Students of Interior Design Politecnico di Milano, Expressing Aestheticss of Misery (Engelen, 2015)

Audiovisual and digital technologies have become a means of controlling the conscious and unconscious rhythms of bodies and soul they also modulate the rhythms of consciousness and life. The notion of aesthetic engagement, capable of founding a new communal sensibility and a genuine aesthetic community, have largely collapsed today. This is because the overwhelming majority of the population is now totally subjected to the aesthetic conditioning of marketing, and therefore estranged from any experience of aesthetic inquiry. The part of the population that continues to experiment aesthetically has turned its back on those who live in the misery of this conditioning.

Stiegler appeals to the art world to develop a political understanding of its role. In this volume, he pays particular attention to cinema which occupies a unique position in the temporal war that is the cause of symbolic misery. At once industrial technology and art, cinema is the aesthetic experience that can combat conditioning on its own territory (Fitzpatrick, 2014).

### A Comparative Study in Contemporary Interior Design

As mentioned above, industrial style is style that is now popular in contemporary interior design as it can be seen in some new cafes in the city of Bandung. In short, industrial style is an interior design referring to old factory or abandoned barn (Sherman, 2015). An old factory is turned into a new interior function such as living room, bedrooms, cafes, and so on. What happen inside the factory is that labors work hard to produce goods to fulfill people needs. The concept of interior design can refer to a various background that creates various atmospheres. In industrial style, we can also find people who struggle as labor to earn living. It can be seen

as a part of labor misery and as a destiny of human life.

Misery, from modernism design view, can simply be defined as broken formal living. It can be seen as a part of labor misery and as a destiny of human life. forms. In urban sociological perspective, misery is born from the inability of the urban social system that makes the social order of the urban fairer. There is an element of omission to let people fight without urban infrastructure support. People without financial ability come to cities and is left to survive in their own way. They build shelter or any efforts to survive.

In industrial-style interior design, the obsolete or used materials are placed in a certain composition and create interior with the memory of old factory. Exposed brick shows the old age wall. The old pipes, the used wires, and old and rough plank tell the users about the past and labor life as well as fate. Beside the impression of an old abandoned factory or barn, we also can find or feel the misery of labor inside. The use of materials that creates the atmosphere of industrial style which is close to unfinished, ruined-look, or rough surface seem far away from hygien.

Two cafes as the samples in this paper are The Parlour cafe in north Bandung and Pizzalogy in Cihampelas Walk. Both can be seen as the best examples of industrial style in the city of Bandung, mainly for what they express in most interior design elements. The most prominent of the two cafes is the use of used materials which are reprocessed into interior elements and are presented as a whole, with the cafes' industrial interior style. The Parlour can be said as a resort cafe due to its location in the hill and its use of the Bandung view as an added value, while Pizzalogy is a kind of urban cafe due to its place in a shopping center. Although a resort



Figure 2 The Parlour cafe used used brick, treated in an artistic way by graffiti

cafe, The Parlour seems to use mixed atmosphere, between city and sub-urban atmosphere

In the front of the cafe building, there is a used brick wall as the symbol of old building which is treated by graffiti painting, a street art we can easily find on the abandoned building in the cities. This visual element invites guests to an abandoned old-urban feel.

Beside the used brick, other used materials that are also applied are used wood, metal and floor material. Those materials are dominant in most cafe with industrial style approach as it can be found in Pizzalogy. The dinning table in Pizzalogy is designed from used wooden truck box or designed as the way they used to be. The writing on the former wooden truck box is partially left, so that the guests still can read the words. For the table foot, they apply used plumbing pipes.

For the floor, Pizzalogy uses the used flooring material of old houses, known as PC tiles which are made of portland cement. The PC tiles are composed in different colour such as red, yellow and grey. the old and dull colour is because the age factor is clearly visible from the surface of the pc tiles, and they are left as they are.

From the brief description on the two cafes's materials as comparative examples above, we can find that the aesthetic concept of misery already exists in interior design, although it is not in straight or intentionally made. The aesthetic concept of misery is expressed in symbolical way by using the used interior materials and shapes which tend to arise the feeling of misery condition. The impression of the users in the way they translate the meaning of atmosphere is reflected by old, broken abandoned, used, and obsolete materials that can lead to interpretation of misery.



Figure 3 The Dinning Table Apply Used Wood from Truck Box ( Pizzalogy, Cihampelas Walk)



Figure 4 Used PC Tiles for Floor ( Pizzalogy, Cihampelas Walk)

The materials composition placed in the interior, on fine art view, can be seen as painting, and it tells the way it looks. This is the interpretation of visual object and can be traced as the element of the memory of misery and the story of the struggle of life in the city. However, in the contemporary interior design with message as prominent idea, it is not hard to present the misery as visual object in interior design.

## CONCLUSION

Contemporary interior design is not only talks about the function of place resulted from a beautiful space but also talks about a matter of atmosphere that can consist of symbolical matter, including the symbol of misery in the form of the use of old and used materials. In addition, the atmosphere of interior not only can be perceived or enjoyed, but also can be interpreted with various meaning depending on the impression of the users or the guests who come or use the room. The source of the impression of the room users is their background including their experience in feeling the interior; also, the amount of their life experience which can significantly give an influence to the impression. Say we enter airport terminal and get experience from the main entrance until the gate to the airplane. There, we probably find the misery of how hard the immigration system works.

What Michelle De Lucchi argues that misery is absent in interior design is not true. There are evidences that misery exists in interior design, in the form of materials used that refer to an old grim abandoned building which leaves sorrow or misery as a part of the past. The industrial style expresses the misery condition but in the smooth way. The atmosphere on an interior is created mostly by the usage and composition of materials. If a painter uses colors for the composition of a painting, an interior designer uses materials, including colors and lighting to create the atmosphere or the characters of a room. Our perception inside a room is arised by collecting all visual objects in mind. Those objects create the meaning interpreted by the users called impression. Generally speaking, the aesthetics of misery can also exist in interior

interior design but not in straight meaning. It is embedded in the materials that are used in the interior. We can understand the concept of aesthetics of misery as the concept that uses othe old and used materials as well as broken form. This broken forms can be interpreted as an evident of the people history who lived there.

However, aesthetics of misery is a new approach in design field. It is created as an appreciation to thosewho struggle for live. The characters of misery in other form and even in straight persistence are represented by old and used materials which exist in the interior design. This aesthetics concept offers the visual experience that invites the user to be more human or appreciate any human being achievement, no matter how bad it looks.

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## NOTE

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