# THE AESTHETICS OF GRIEF IN JOSEPH LABAN'S BACONAUA

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay examines the formal articulation of grief in Joseph Laban's Cinemalaya film, *Baconaua*, and how it structures loss through cinematic elements and techniques. Set in a coastal village on the island of Marinduque, and haunted by the sudden disappearance of the siblings' father and a mystery that occurred at sea, the film suspends grief within a state of liminality. Drawing on the works of Derrida, Bachelard, Brinkema, and Langer, this critical essay explores how repetition, underexposure, negative space, and duration function as cinematic articulations of grief through form. The film sustains the experience of loss through slowness, silence, and the persistent presence of water. Its cyclical rhythm reinforces grief as something that does not progress but continuously returns.

**KEYWORDS: Grief, Cinemalaya, Formalism, Aesthetics, Filipino Film**

"Without a body there's no soul and without the latter there's no way to speak about the sea," the poet, painter, and essayist, Etel Adnan writes in her book *Sea and Fog* (23).

The body serves as the vessel to speak about the sea. When the body vanishes, it's not only the flesh that's lost, but also the voice, and the narratives it holds. When the body vanishes, the wisdom gained in its journey, perhaps

mostly about the sea itself, also gets lost. When the body vanishes, the sea remains unknown, for it is within the body that the soul resides, and it is through the soul that the mysterious and the ethereal come into being and meaning. But there is no one to speak about the sea anymore. And it is not only the lost body that disappears, but also the remaining ones, despite their physical presence, for they fall, unable to comprehend. Grief disorients them. Though quiet, there is turmoil.

Set in a small fishing village on an island in Marinduque, *Baconaua* follows three siblings, Divina, Dian, and Dino, who struggle to keep afloat after their father suddenly disappears at sea. Despite the weight of loss without closure, the siblings and the townspeople carry on with their lives in their small community, navigating the challenges that come in the aftermath of the disappearance. As Divina assumes the role of head of the household, tensions arise between her and her younger siblings; their lives remain caught between sorrow and survival, waiting for a truth that may never come. Days later, still unable to find their father, Divina is forced to declare him dead, despite the uncertainty about his fate; for them, the sea remains an ominous presence.

Both Susan Langer and Eugenie Brinkema argue that form is the means by which feeling or affect is structured and articulated. They provide a foundation for understanding grief, not as something a film depicts, but as a structured aesthetic condition. Grief is embedded in the work's formal elements and must be analyzed as such. Their close reading method involves "slow, deep attention" to the details of form (Brinkema 37).

Langer's concept of articulate form is grounded in her study of music. She argues that if music can express the form of feeling symbolically, entirely through sound and silence, then all art, including film, can express emotion through form alone. When a filmmaker arranges formal elements, it is not always to represent a narrative, or for aesthetics, but to construct

a symbolic form—a perceptible structure that mirrors the experience of feeling. In this case, not grief itself, but the experience of grief.

Similarly, Brinkema, in her radical formalism insists that affect is always already constituted by and expressed through form, embedded as it were in the folds of the text itself. Form is not a container that delivers feeling to the viewer. Rather, the formal structure of the text, its editing, duration, spatial design, and even its silences and absences, are themselves affect.

While Brinkema acknowledges that forms can vary across contexts, and can be influenced by norms, she resists integrating broader social or ideological readings into her radical formalism. Langer is more open: she acknowledges that symbolic forms are historically and culturally shaped, even when they appear to transcend their immediate context. She recognizes that artists draw on available cultural models of feeling, and that expressive acts reflect more than individual emotions. However, she does not develop this point extensively.

This analysis limits itself to the formalist methods proposed by Brinkema and Langer. It focuses on how grief is articulated through formal cinematic elements, such as camera angles, composition, lighting, sound, color, and mise-en-scène. It does not engage in the broader sociological or cultural analyses of grief. Narrative analysis is also not taken into account. But by analyzing grief as a structured aesthetic condition, it offers insights into how form articulates an abstract and immaterial experience.

**Slowness and Repetition as Moments of Suspension**

After the father's sudden disappearance, the narrative progression, despite the siblings' need to search for truth, slows down. Instead, the film presents the lives of the siblings without dramatizing their experiences,

capturing them from a careful distance. The film's deliberate refusal to express grief through conventional melodramatic denouement shifts the articulation of loss onto its formal elements. It therefore becomes necessary to scrutinize its aesthetics choices, since these serve as the main storytelling device in rendering the experience of grief.

There is a noticeable slowness, not only in the lives of the characters as inhabitants of a sleepy village, but also in the storytelling pace of the film. This slowness, as Lutz Koepnick suggests, provides an alternative mode of representing trauma, in contrast to other approaches in the study of affect that rely on the aesthetics of speed and violence (qtd. in Mai 64). This temporal structuring reflects how time itself feels arrested in grief. The world moves on, but for the bereaved siblings, time stands still. Prolonged shots create a lingering effect within the scenes with extended durations before the next cut. Many shots last between five to ten seconds, allowing the sea, the passing of a boat, or the movement of a character to unfold at its natural pace.

On a night of the full moon, in the late hours, the eldest sister, Divina, steps out of the house and walks to the shore. Her silhouette fills the left side of the frame washed in blue monochromatic tones. Flashes of thunder illuminate the sky behind her. The howling of the wind and crashing waves resound. She stays there for a while, withholding any explicit action.

In another scene, the younger sister, Dian, stands on the shore, gazing out at the sea. One hand holds the other arm, as though waiting. Her silence is briefly interrupted by a short conversation with her older sister's friend. As the dialogue suggests, it is afternoon, but the flatness of the image and the blue color grading obscure any clear sense of time. The scene closes with a wide shot of her, empty boats docked behind her, and the waves rolling in.

These moments do not depict grief through overt expression, but through restraint and atmosphere. The sisters' stillness, the vastness of the

shore, and the weight of the surrounding elements render grief as something unspoken yet deeply felt. Bachelard, in *The Dialectic of Duration*, describes slow passages in music as moments of reflection, "areas in which deferred emotion is realised" (114). This temporal structure also applies to *Baconaua*'s extended shots and use of slowness, for they function as moments of emotional suspension. The film expresses grief's inescapability through its very structure, linear and prolonged, holding affect in place.

This state of suspension aligns with the concept of liminality. As Bjørn Thomassen explains, liminality is not about fixed moments in time, but about an indefinite state of transition (16). One is no longer in the past, but has not yet reached a stable future. He notes, "In liminality, there is no certainty concerning the outcome. Liminality is a world of contingency where events and ideas, and 'reality' itself, can be carried in different directions" (5). This vague position makes liminality even more distressing, for it feels like an eternal existence in between things. In their father's absence, the siblings remain suspended. Every waking hour is a life lived in uncertainty.

*Baconaua* also expresses grief as a state that does not get resolved but instead deepens, accumulates, and shifts in intensity over time. The film structures the experience of grief through the sensory experience of the sea itself—its echoes, its resonances. Through repetition, the sea serves as a visual and sonic motif. In the film, the sound of the howling wind and the rhythmic crashing of waves along the shore constantly reverberates in the background. The sea's ebb and flow throughout the film function as an auditory memory, a spectral presence that continually reminds the bereaved siblings of what has been lost. This constant presence reinforces the Derridean notion of haunting, where the past persists in the present.

Each recurrence of the sea, though seemingly familiar, shifts in angle, composition, lighting, and mise-en-scène. The sea appears, a narrative

happens, then the sea appears again, another narrative happens. Toward the latter half, fewer wide shots appear, altering the shot's affective structure. This cinematographic inflections prevent the sea from becoming a static symbol. It also creates a disorienting effect, mirroring the experience of loss. Through various shots of the sea, the film presents an almost looping effect, reinforcing the notion that grief is cyclical rather than linear. These repetitive shots establish a cinematic atmosphere of being in transition without resolution.

Although he does not write about grief directly, Gilles Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* provides a useful perspective for understanding the film's technique. He expounds on the idea of repetition, and argues that it is not a mechanical recurrence but a process of transformation and disguise. He writes, "Repetition is truly that which disguises itself in constituting itself, that which constitutes itself only by disguising itself. It is not underneath the masks, but is formed from one mask to another...with and within the variations." (Deleuze 17)

As it composes and re-composes itself, the repetition serves as a form of disguise, and it is only through this disguise that it continues to take shape. Although the film breaks continuity in its repetition, it composes what it wishes to reinforce—the affective structure of grief. The changing visuals create the disguise, but there is a transformation. This echoes Deleuze's assertion that "there is no first term which is repeated," only a series of evolving variations. (17) The recurrence of the boat, the sea, and the wind allows grief to accumulate. Yet they do not move toward a resolution in any conventional narrative sense. Different from what previous theories on grief psychology suggest, grief is not processed in clear stages but lingers, much like the tides.

**Presencing Through Vastness and Absence**

The bleak, vast, unchanging landscape, set against an expansive sky, casts the bereaved siblings as insignificant characters against an overwhelming world. This kind of composition creates a sense of isolation, with characters rendered small within the frame. It also captures Elizabeth Gilbert's notion of grief as overpowering. As she notes, "Grief… happens upon you, it's bigger than you. There is a humility that you have to step into, where you surrender to being moved through the landscape of grief by grief itself. And it has its own timeframe, it has its own itinerary with you, it has its own power over you, and it will come when it comes. And when it comes, it's a bow-down." (Qtd. in Popova)

The vastness of the landscape rendered in the composition captures an immensity of scale that is difficult to comprehend. The bereaved siblings are made to bow down to the boundless reality of loss. Once grief happens, it stays. The landscape serves as a materialization of that grief. Yet there is also an interesting mode in the smallness of the filmic coverage. It avoids presenting every possible space of the setting. Instead, the film limits itself to the already familiar shores. The spatial contrast between the vastness of space, and its limited coverage, serves as a paradoxical reinforcing device, where the more it presents the familiar, the more it highlights its unfamiliarity.

Contrast also works in another formal context, since the film's most evident formal articulation is through its use of underexposed lighting and shadow-heavy composition. The deliberate use of underexposure and a cool-toned color palette reduces visual clarity in specific scenes. Instead the facial expressions and the movements of the characters being clearly seen, they are reduced to shadows moving on the screen. Tonal values also abstract the characters' presence, reducing individual expressivity. These choices create a visual structure that withholds information. The film's obscured figures

visually articulate incompleteness—a liminal state of semi-presence and semi-absence.

Justin Remes writes about the conflicting and misunderstood notions related to void and emptiness. To further elucidate the concept, he cites the Buddhist idea of *sunyata*. The Sanskrit word is often translated as "the Void," but as Stephen Batchelor explains, this rendering is misleading. "*Sunyata* (emptiness) is rendered into English as 'the Void' by translators who overlook the fact that the term is neither prefixed by a definite article ('the'), nor exalted with a capital letter... The notion of emptiness falls prey to the very habit of mind it was intended to undermine." (Qtd. in Remes 145)

Remes clarifies that, while translating the word as "emptiness" (rather than "the Void") avoids this metaphysical misreading, it still risks flattening the term's complexity. *Sunyata* is neither absence nor presence per se, but both. As the Japanese philosopher Masao Abe notes, *sunyata* posits a "dialectical and dynamic structure," in which "emptiness is fullness and fullness is emptiness." (Qtd. in Remes 145) In the film, this paradoxical non-emptiness of emptiness is also deployed as an aesthetic condition.

As people of the sea, the villagers make a living through fishing. A scene in the film shows the bereaved sisters struggling to push the docked boat from the shore as they are about to set sail. Their hunched bodies indicate another paradox, since, instead of easily moving the boat in the absence of someone riding on it, the scene expresses an invisible but oppressive weight. The stillness of the remaining boats ruptures the mise-en-scène, for the boats also serve as trace objects that are left behind for the bereaved to mourn over, like an inheritance. This embodies what Derrida describes as the "non-present present"—an absence that remains materially inscribed within the frame. (5)

In his introduction to Derrida's work, particularly on the trace, Michael Naas explains, "Derrida seems to lend credence to the simple version of inheritance and of mourning I evoked at the outset: one lives, one leaves things behind—a piece of paper, a final interview, a corpse and a corpus, traces and memories—and then one goes away, one disappears, one dies, and those who remain are left to inherit and to mourn. Nothing seems more self-evident or ineluctable. As Derrida says, 'it is impossible to escape this structure.'" (Naas 115)

As mentioned, the body serves as the vessel, and in its absence, the sea remains unknown, for it is through the body that the meaning unfolds. Bodies clarify the intentions of the characters. But the partial avoidance of shooting human bodies in *Baconaua* creates the illusion of absence and the perception of emptiness, since it often serves as the locus for understanding the unfolding narratives and movements. The scene favors the form by providing poeticism through the fullness of the atmosphere. Its formal vagueness and obscurity serve as its own aesthetic device. Every absence is a form of presence, not of the thing itself, but of something else. It is its dialectic dynamic.

**Water and Ritual as Structuring Devices**

With no proof of their father's passing, the siblings resist totally accepting his tragic fate; only the sea stands as both suspect and witness to his disappearance. But even as it holds the weight of something unsettled, they must continue to engage with the sea for food, for survival. It sustains them, yet they also fear it, for what it might take from them. The sea becomes paradoxical, since it is both a giver of life and a site of loss. In his reflection on water, Bachelard presents its fluidity as the source of its complexity. He writes:

> Water is truly the transitory element. It is the essential, ontological metamorphosis between fire and earth. A being dedicated to water is a being in flux. He dies every minute; something of his substance is constantly falling away. Daily death is not fire's exuberant form of death, piercing heaven with its arrows; daily death is the death of water. Water always flows, always falls, always ends in horizontal death. In innumerable examples, we shall see that for the materializing imagination, death associated with water is more dream-like than death associated with earth: the pain of water is infinite. (6)

In relation to the father's absence, his death never seems to end. The sorrow of the siblings becomes infinite, since they continue to be reconciled not yet to their grief, but to the truth about the possibility of death itself. The sea's refusal to offer clear answers makes the siblings' grief equally boundless. It becomes a space of suspension, where loss lingers, having no real closure. With this, another paradox emerges: the villagers live by the sea, and are supposed to know it intimately, yet it remains vast and unknowable.

Bachelard also argues that water retains the past without solidifying it. It moves, flows, and changes, despite appearing static. He writes, "Water becomes heavier, darker, deeper; it becomes matter." (Bachelard 20) At times, the water looks calm, almost still, no large tidal waves, no strong crashing against the shoreline. Yet the sea's mystery is something more dense, something more profound than what its surface suggests. Over time, grief also becomes heavier, deeper, and darker, as opposed to the expectation that it becomes lighter. The experience becomes deep-seated, unmoving, refusing to come to a clear resolution.

Although connected, grief and mourning are not the same. Brinkema notes that grief is "a private, visceral experience that encompasses emotional, cognitive, and physical responses to loss." (72) Mourning, however, is described by Derrida not merely as a release of pain, but a means of sustaining connection. As he describes it, mourning is an ongoing engagement with loss, and with each loss, "the first death" is always repeated, and yet, each time it arrives, it is something new (15). This is why he sees mourning as a kind of "work." In Filipino culture, it is traditionally marked by visible rituals. These practices are integral to the work of mourning as a way of keeping the memory of the deceased alive.

The film's most evident mourning ritual is the *padasal* scene in the latter half of the film. It marks the explicit acknowledgment of grief, after the siblings' prolonged period of waiting and denial. The *padasal* gives them direction and a way to deal with loss. As Meghan O'Rourke notes, "Rituals used to help the community by giving everyone a sense of what to do or say." (Qtd. in Popova) She also observes that ritual is not limited to the individual. It is a manifestation of a particular cultural practice, a reflection of the values of the community.

In more conventional film representations of grief, characters often wear black or dark clothes to signify mourning. But in *Baconaua*, the bereaved siblings continue to wear their everyday clothing as they continue with their lives, without any clear indication, through costume, that they are grieving. The lack of visual signifiers contributes to the film's sense of ambiguity. Black garments do not appear until the ritual scene later in the film, where people from the village all wear their mourning clothes.

This material articulation through sartorial expression is effective, since liminal rites are transitional phases that strip individuals of distinct identity, positioning them within a collective transition. In *Baconaua*, the

*padasal* scene enacts this visually. Apart from the clothing, the boats move slowly across the frame, with figures rendered as near-indistinct silhouettes. This dissolves their individual subjectivity, which echoes O'Rourke's point, and reinforces the ritual as a communal rather than a personal act. As Victor Turner writes, liminal phenomena create a space of "homogeneity and comradeship," offering "a 'moment in and out of time,' and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond." (90)

Unlike conventional rites of passage, *Baconaua*'s ritual suspends the bereaved siblings in liminality rather than reintegrating them into a stable order. This aligns with Turner's concept of liminality where individuals are "neither here nor there," existing betwixt and between fixed points of social structure. (89) Despite the ubiquitousness of death in their village, as established in the earlier part of the film, the siblings delay the ritual, since doing so would have signified quick acceptance.

Though the *padasal* scene serves a narrative function, an act that acknowledges the father's fate, it is also the film's densest formal moment. But instead of dramatic intensity, it is articulated through layered audiovisual composition. The scene opens with the neighbors expressing their condolences to the bereaved siblings. It cuts to the latter carrying the boat from the shore to the sea, with some of their neighbors helping them with the task. Behind them, the chanters fill the silence. The scene moves to a middle shot, showing more boats moving across the sea as the boatmen paddle. The tune continues, slicing through the sound of the surf. No one says a word, everyone deep in silence, but for the chanters. The sound changes to plucking strings, beginning with single notes as though searching for a melody. It continues to the next scene showing the siblings already back home, lighting some candles.

The delicate handling of the scene reflects the fragile emotions it depicts. It is a distillation of the film's aesthetics. It emphasizes extended duration, static framing, and subdued composition through restraint and umbrage, the scene covered in muted blues and monochromatic tones. Turner's idea of ritual time as being "out of time" is also reflected in the slow pacing and indistinct lighting, which obscure temporal markers. This reinforces the frozen temporality of grief. The absence of non-diegetic music also removes external emotional cues. Compared to the earlier ritual scene and other moments in the film, the shots in this scene are closer to the subjects, making them more confrontational and immediate.

Near the end of the film, the grief of the sisters becomes more complicated as another death occurs. Their brother Dino dies. Although not through drowning, it is still the result of their life near water, of their vulnerability to outside entities. It is a return to the idea that the sea takes more than it gives. There is a moment of emotional display: the sisters crying from the pain of what has happened to their brother. But this doesn't last for long. It cuts to a scene with Divina traversing on a boat. The skewed overhead shot makes the movement of the boat appear slanted. When she passes beyond the frame, the shot stays static, with nothing remaining on the screen but the shot of the still water. The scene is quiet again. Yet inside Divina, there is deep sorrow.

**Baconua's Aesthetics of Loss**

*Baconaua* articulates grief through its cinematic rhythm, mise-en-scène, and restrained audiovisual composition. It lingers in prolonged silences. The film's underexposed lighting, shadow-heavy composition, and muted color palette, express grief as something that is not directly shown but

deeply felt. Faces fade into darkness, figures dissolve into their surroundings, rendering the characters suspended between presence and absence.

The film resists overt sentimentality. Instead, it shapes grief through slow cinematic techniques. The *padasal* scene extends this idea, positioning ritual as a state of suspension. The slow passage of boats, the silhouetted figures, and the layering of chants with nature sounds create an atmosphere where loss, is not spoken but absorbed into space. As opposed to catharsis, the scene sustains uncertainty. It holds grief in place instead of letting it go. Grief, then, is not something the film overcomes, but something it remains caught in.

Spatial emptiness also serves as an articulation of loss. Negative space and unoccupied objects, such as the father's unused boat, are silent markers of absence, structuring grief into material objects rather than dramatizing it. As Brinkema suggests, grief in cinema emerges through the structuring of, not only what is present, but also what is absent. (46)

In *Baconaua*, the sea functions as grief's central structuring force. As Bachelard notes, "[W]ater will appear to us as a complete being with body, soul, and voice." (*Water and Dreams* 15) Despite the absence of the body, the water recurs as an inescapable presence, with its cyclical rhythm reinforcing grief as something that continuously returns. Grief is rendered as an indefinite space of loss—one as vast and inescapable as the sea itself.

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