Environmental Amnesia as an Effect of Rhythmic Temporal Experience: The Dissonance of Climate Change

Could climate skepticism be cultural? Merleau-Ponty (1986) argued that because human perceptions are tied to abstractions of sense inputs, understandings of experience may be more affected by the “expressive value” of sensation than the objective experience of sense input (6). In contrast, Elizabeth Tonkin’s (1995) work on temporality interrogates the divide between aggregated “minor details” and “individuals’ [sensory] perceptions” of the same details (72) thereby creating tension in understanding how individual humans perceive temporal changes. Bourdieu (1989) argues that social practices and power relations create practical apprehension whereby “the familiar world... [is] perceived as natural” (18). In this paper, I interrogate the processes of climate change denial, through analysis of a particular amnesiac defect in Western perception of natural cycles and patterns by arguing that our musical lineage affects cultural constructions of climate and the threat of climate change. In my analysis, I use music as a tool of interrogation—dissecting two very separate constructions of music— the very linear, definite, and predictable Western forms of classical music (e.g. the rules defining counterpoint) and the cyclical and dissonant (by Western perception) Hindustani classical music (notably the rhythmic structure known as tal). I then argue that the linear progressions on which Western music is traditionally based devalue objective experience in favor of emotional amnesia and harmony, an effect that may intrinsically support the denial of objective observation of climate change by promoting a passive sensory experience.

Works Cited