



ARTICLE



<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02594-x>

OPEN

“Listening to the zoom of a hornet”: Virginia Woolf’s feminist reflections on the sounds of military weapons and war violence

Haifeng Zhu¹ , Hui Ding²  & Weiyu Chen¹

In her diaries, novels, and essays, Virginia Woolf records the psychological trauma the British people suffered from in the soundscape of military weapons during the two world wars and describes its delayed effects on the populace after the wars. Drawing upon the notions of the soundscape and Johan Galtung’s violence triangle, this paper explores how Woolf’s works portray the traumatic experience brought by the soundscape of military weapons to soldiers and ordinary citizens during the two world wars and discusses how the roar of cars and planes in her works induces the public’s traumatic memory after the wars. Then, through a close study of her essay “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, this paper contends that the soundscape of German air raids compels Woolf to contemplate the roles of feminism in opposing the wars and healing war trauma.

¹School of Foreign Languages, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China. ²School of Foreign Languages, Changchun Normal University, Changchun, China. ✉email: zuhf100@nenu.edu.cn; dinghui@ccsfu.edu.cn

Introduction

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), one of the most influential British feminist writers, lived through two world wars and witnessed the violence of warfare inflicted upon the British people by the sounds of military weapons ranging from cannons and bombers to anti-aircraft guns. She skillfully depicts the suffering inflicted upon the British people by the sounds of military weapons during the two world wars in several of her novels, including *Jacob's Room* (1920), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *The Waves* (1931), posthumous *Between the Acts* (1941) and an essay “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid” (1940), shedding light on the physical and psychological damage on civilians caused by war violence. This paper aims to interpret the depiction of military weapon sounds in Woolf's works using the notions of soundscape and Johan Galtung's violence triangle to demonstrate how military weapon sounds inflict traumatic experiences on the listeners. It seeks to illustrate how the roaring sounds of modern vehicles like cars and airplanes after the First World War trigger listeners' traumatic memories of the war and investigate how the soundscape of air raids stimulates Woolf's insightful feminist reflections on military weapon sounds and war violence. Woolf suggests that the essence of war violence correlates with patriarchal norms and highlights that fleeting memories of a pre-war idyllic life and the serene sounds of the countryside could serve as therapeutic approaches to address war-induced trauma.

The discordant sounds emitted by military weapons posed a traumatic threat to both the physical and psychological well-being of the affected population. Virginia Woolf records the panic, unease, and existential uncertainty provoked by these sounds during air raids in her diary entries. On August 16, 1940, Woolf encountered German bombers at close range for the first time. She vividly describes the sound they produced as resembling “someone sawing in the air just above us”, amidst a persistent backdrop of disconcerting noises: a blend of “hum & saw & buzz all around us” interspersed with intermittent sounds of “pop pop pop” (Woolf, 1984, pp. 311–312). Within the distressing soundscape, Woolf remains acutely aware of the imminent danger and acknowledges the haunting possibility that someone “might be killed any moment”, prompting her sensations of “pressure, danger, and horror” (Woolf, 1984, pp. 313–314). In the essay “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, she employs metaphors such as “the zoom of a hornet which may at any moment sting you to death”, “the sawing of a branch overhead” and “death rattle overhead” to emphasize the menacing threat of the sounds emitted from German bombers in an air raid on the British listeners (Woolf, 1942, pp. 243–245). She asserts that such sound compels listeners to contemplate peace: “It is a sound—far more than prayers and anthems—that should compel one to think about peace” (Woolf, 1942, p. 243).

The evocative depictions of sounds emitted by military weapons in Woolf's literary works and diary entries have received scant scholarly attention. Primarily, researchers, influenced by R. Murray Schafer's *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Turning of the World* (1994), have focused their investigations on the auditory dimensions of everyday life. Cuddy-Keane (2000) stands out as the first to apply Schafer's notion of the soundscape to examine Woolf's works, particularly in the context of sound technology and new aurality. Furthermore, Frattarola (2005), Varga (2014), Clements (2019), Xu (2022), and Zhou (2022) have delved into Woolf's depiction of music and street sounds. Another area of focus that previous researchers have been attentive to is the violence Woolf endured in her childhood, including the sexual abuse inflicted by her two half-brothers and the wartime violence she encountered in her maturity during the two world wars. Scholars such as Brewer (1999), Cole (2012), and

Zhu and Shen (2014) have delved into Woolf's narration of violence. However, the aforementioned research has not sufficiently examined the intricate relationship between auditory writing and war violence in Woolf's works and has not extensively explored Woolf's reflections on war violence from the perspective of auditory narration. The intrinsic link between the sounds generated by weapons and the violence of war acts as a crucial gateway for interpreting Woolf's works, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the direct, indirect, and cultural violence intricately interwoven within her narratives. This perspective provides a significant pathway to scrutinize Woolf's writings through a feminist lens, stimulating contemplation on humanity's ability to navigate the traumas inflicted by the violence of war.

Johan Galtung's violence triangle

Johan Galtung, a prominent pioneer in the field of peace and conflict studies, introduces a framework that categorizes violence into direct, structural, and cultural forms. The framework gives rise to the concept of the violence triangle. In “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research” (1969), Galtung initially proposes the concepts of direct and structural violence. He contends that direct violence typically requires “an actor that commits the violence” (Galtung, 1969, p. 170). He illustrates it by citing actions like war, genocide, mutilation, rape, imprisonment, slavery, and disciplinary measures, commonly categorized as instances of direct violence. Direct violence primarily emerges from warfare, leading to detrimental somatic and psychological effects on the victims. It encompasses the infliction of harm on the victims' “body, mind or spirit”, which frequently results in “traumas that may carry violence over time” (Galtung, 1996, p. 31).

Galtung articulates that structural violence operates covertly and subtly, lacking identifiable individuals committing explicit acts yet inflicting detrimental harm on human well-being. It chiefly emanates from the collective functioning of established and respected societal forces. This form of violence operates through disparities in power, generating unequal life opportunities. Further elaborating on this concept, he defines structural violence as the utilization of “political, oppressive and economic, exploitative” means to perpetuate an unjust distribution of resources and power (Galtung, 1996, p. 31).

Furthermore, in his 1990 article entitled “Cultural Violence”, Galtung defines cultural violence as any element within a culture that serves to “legitimize violence in its direct or structural form”, and exemplifies this concept by highlighting cultural divisions such as “religion and ideology, art and language, and empirical and formal science” as instances of cultural violence (Galtung, 1990, p. 291). Additionally, he expounds on how the legitimization of both direct and structural violence occurs through the propagation of “religious, legal, and ideological beliefs within educational institutions and media platforms” (Galtung, 1996, p. 196).

Throughout the two world wars, the sounds emitted by military weapons, such as cannons, bombers, artillery, and firearms, pervaded the senses of soldiers and civilians, inflicting not only severe physical harm but also psychological trauma upon the listeners. Consequently, these individuals became direct victims of violence. Those who had been traumatized by wars were often perceived as dissenters challenging established social systems. In response, the ruling class employed structural violence to discipline these dissenting individuals, justifying an unequal allocation of resources and power. The legitimization of direct and structural violence frequently occurred within cultural violence, notably through the shaping of beliefs, attitudes, and symbolic representations.

Direct violence: the impact of military weapon soundscape

Woolf's diary entries vividly depict the direct violence the listeners suffered from the sounds of weapons during air raids in the First World War. In the diary entry dated December 6, 1917, Woolf recounts that "I was wakened by L. (Leonard Woolf, her husband) to a most instant sense of guns: as if one's faculties jumped up fully dressed" (Woolf, 1979, pp. 84–85). The sound of the guns at one point is "so loud that the whistle of the shell going up followed the explosion" (Woolf, 1979, p. 85). In the diary entry dated March 8, 1918, she details her restless night due to a German air raid. She describes hearing an explosion, followed by the abrupt eruption of gunfire all around and the piercing sound of whistles: "The guns went off all around us & we heard the whistles" (Woolf, 1979, p. 124). Subsequently, she could hear that "there was a great though distant explosion; & after that the guns set in very thick & fast to north & south, never, but once, so near us as Barnes" (Woolf, 1979, p. 124).

In her essay "Heard on the Downs: The Genesis of Myth" (1916), Woolf vividly portrays the horrible auditory perception of the listeners in the South Downs caused by the sound of guns from France. To listeners in the South Downs, a range of chalk hills in the south-eastern coastal counties of England, the sound of guns in the French fronts "sounds like the beating of gigantic carpets by gigantic women, at a distance" (Woolf, 1987, p. 40). The listeners treat it as the "sinister sound of far-off beating, which is sometimes as faint as the ghost of an echo, and sometimes rises almost from the next fold of grey land" (Woolf, 1987, p. 40). The disturbing soundscape evokes haunting imagery for the listeners, described as "many phantoms hovering on the borderland of belief and skepticism" (Woolf, 1987, p. 40). It compels listeners to correlate the roots of war with human vanity, desire, and a strong sense of national importance.

The sound of nocturnal women beating great carpets in *Jacob's Room* is a metaphorical allusion to Jacob's death in the First World War, effectively highlighting the profound anguish inflicted upon numerous families who endure the tragic loss of their loved ones due to the brutality of war. Awakened from her drowsy state by the resounding gunshots, Mrs. Betty Flanders, Jacob's mother, sluggishly gets out of bed from her half-asleep and goes to close the window "decorated with a fringe of dark leaves" (Woolf, 2000, p. 172), while estimating the booming sound coming from the sea far away. The reverberating dullness of the guns penetrates her consciousness, evoking an auditory image that "nocturnal women were beating great carpets", along with some sob stories about the loss of the family members that occur to her: "There was Morty lost, and Seabrook dead; her sons fighting for their country" (Woolf, 2000, p. 288). Betty Flanders's response to the booming sound coming from the sea far away shows "the risk and potential fear that can be invoked by not knowing the source of a sound" (Clements, 2019, p. 109). David Bradshaw posits that a fringe of dark leaves on the window might "represent the young lives which would be lost in the war, assuming a wreath-like form" (Bradshaw, 2003, p. 16). Within the soundscape of the gunfire, the juxtaposition of Mrs. Flanders's window, "decorated with a fringe of dark leaves", and the narrations of "there was Morty lost, and Seabrook dead; her sons fighting for their country" conveys a poignant implication of Jacob's eventual sacrifice on the battlefield in the subsequent chapter.

The chapter "1917" in Woolf's novel *The Years* sets the scene in a London cellar during a German air raid, a predominantly auditory narrative space. It utilizes the characters' auditory perception of the sound of guns to unfold their psychological narrative, revealing the direct violence experienced by the characters in the soundscape of an air raid. The sound of British anti-aircraft guns firing at German bombers is an essential focus of narration

for Woolf to describe the characters' auditory perception and depict the threat of war violence. When the guns boom loudly overhead, Eleanor realizes that the German bombers are approaching and feels "a curious heaviness on top of her head. One, two, three, four, she counted, looking up at the greenish-grey stone" (Woolf, 1977, p. 288). Steven Connor argues that "there is the absolute deprivation of sight for the victims of the air-raid" and they have to "rely on hearing to give them information about the incoming bombs" and points out that "the terror of the air-raid consists in its grotesquely widened bifurcation of visibility and hearing" (Connor, 1997, p. 210). In this situation, the characters in the cellar cannot perceive the position of the German bombers visually, and the divergence between their visual and auditory perceptions is significantly widened, filling their hearts with fear. They perceive the sound of guns as "a violent crack of sound, like the split of lightning in the sky" and look up, fearing that "at any moment a bomb might fall" (Woolf, 1977, p. 288). Even as the sound of guns becomes fainter and diminishes into the distance, the characters in the cellar are still unable to escape their fear, only able to turn and shift on "their hard chairs as if they had been cramped" (Woolf, 1977, p. 289).

While writing *Between the Acts*, Woolf witnessed the German air raids on England during the Second World War, and she skillfully incorporated the buzzing sounds emitted by warplanes as a disruptive element that intruded upon the narrative process. This intentional interruption heightens the sense of fragmentation in the text and presents the characters' psychological trauma induced by the violence of war. As the open-air historical pageant draws to a close, Mr. Streatfield, a village rector, delivers the closing speech. However, his speech is abruptly interrupted by the sudden buzzing sounds, and the word "opportunity" in his speech is abruptly cut into "opp..." and "portunity".

Mr. Streatfield paused. He listened. Did he hear some distant music?

He continued: "But there is still a deficit" (he consulted his paper) "of one hundred and seventy-five pounds odd. So that each of us who has enjoyed this pageant has still an opp..." The word was cut in two. A zoom severed it. Twelve aeroplanes in perfect formation like a flight of wild duck came overhead. *That* was the music. The audience gaped; the audience gazed. Then zoom became drone. The planes had passed.

"portunity", Mr. Streatfield continued, "to make a contribution" (Woolf, 1992, pp. 114–115).

The word "opportunity" was intended to be fully articulated in Mr. Streatfield's direct quotation; however, the buzzing sounds emanating from the planes instead cut it into "opp" and "ortunity". Woolf's unique technique of dividing the direct quotation serves to intensify the sense of fragmentation and tension in the text. Consequently, the intrusion of airplane sounds and the subsequent reaction of the audience further accentuate this fragmentation and tension, creating a fragmented, shattered, and unstable textual space. The listeners' auditory perception is pierced by the buzzing sounds of the airplanes, eliciting their astonished reaction: "The audience gaped; the audience gazed" (Woolf, 1992, p. 115).

According to R. Murray Schafer, sound power is "sufficient to create a large acoustic profile, and we may speak of it, too, as imperialistic" (Schafer, 1994, p. 77). He adopts a military metaphor, i.e., "If cannons had been silent, they would never have been used in warfare" (Schafer, 1994, p. 78), to clarify the notion of sound imperialism. Thus, the buzzing sounds emitted by the warplanes are sufficient to possess the characteristics of "sound

imperialism” as they not only disrupt the speaker’s words but also forcefully dominate the auditory senses of the listeners. Confronted with the overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, the listeners find themselves unable to fully comprehend the circumstances, exhibiting what Cathy Caruth calls “a numbed state” (Caruth, 1996, p. 11). The listeners become victims of the direct violence, involuntarily displaying expressions of astonishment and fixation in response to the horrible sounds of warplanes.

Structural violence: traumatic memories, auditory hallucinations and sense of proportion

During the First World War, British civilians endured a myriad of German air raids, leading to an increased susceptibility to the sound of bombings. Meanwhile, some soldiers on the battlefield developed shell shock due to prolonged exposure to bomb explosions. Even after the war, they found themselves haunted by the lingering shadows of their traumatic experience. They involuntarily associated certain street sounds with the sounds of war weapons, triggering traumatic delayed reactions and vivid recollections of wartime violence. However, the British government at that time viewed such soldiers as weak or cowardly, a symptom of military neurasthenia, and failed to provide adequate medical treatment. Shell shock was regarded as “a social disease”, and its patients were defined as “outsiders on the margin of established society” (Mosse, 2000, pp. 101–102). Doctors commonly adopted Silas Weir Mitchell’s rest cure treatment, a combination of isolation, rest, and feeding, to discipline these soldiers. The medical discourse subjected the shell-shock veterans to structural violence, exacerbating their conditions and even tragically pushing some toward suicide.

Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart argue that the recollection of traumatic events “always depends on the interaction between encoding and retrieval conditions, or compatibility between the engram and the cue”, and they propose that “the more the contextual stimuli resemble conditions prevailing at the time of the original storage, the more retrieval is likely” (Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart, 1995, p. 174). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the sound of a car backfiring and the rumble of a commercial airplane heard in the streets of post-war London resemble the weapon sounds deeply ingrained in people’s memories, thus leading them to recollect the violence they experienced during the First World War. Anne Fernald further highlights that “bombs dropped from aeroplanes killed over 1000 British civilians during the First World War”, and she suggests that the car backfiring sound and the airplane rumble in *Mrs. Dalloway* both “sound overtone of threat” (Fernald, 2015, p. 215).

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, a sudden car backfiring sound breaks the silence and diffuses itself among the ears of various individuals, including Mrs. Dalloway, Septimus Smith, and those in the vicinity. Engrossed in buying flowers at Miss Pym’s flower shop, Mrs. Dalloway is startled by this sudden noise that resembles a pistol shot. Septimus Smith, a First World War veteran, suffers from shell shock and possesses an extreme sensitivity to sounds resembling pistol shots. He interprets this sound of car backfiring as pistol shots on the battlefield, involuntarily recalling his officer Evans’s death on the battlefield. Consequently, the traumatic experience returns to haunt him, enveloping him in a hallucinated scenario: “This gradual drawing together of everything to one center before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface was about to burst into flames, terrified him. The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames” (Woolf, 1996, p. 18).

The car departs and leaves “a slight ripple which flowed through glove shops and hat shops and tailors’ shops on both

sides of Bond Street” (Woolf, 1996, p. 21). Strangers in the shops recall the traumatic experience of the First World War, and they “looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire” (Woolf, 1996, p. 21). The residual impact of the slight ripple left by the car becomes evident as Mr. Bowley is aware of the trauma inflicted by the First World War: “Poor women, nice little children, orphans, widows, the War—tut-tut—actually had tears in his eyes” (Woolf, 1996, p. 23).

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the rumble of a commercial airplane evokes the listeners’ auditory hallucinations, in which they are haunted by psychological trauma caused by wartime violence. The sound of a commercial airplane bores ominously into “the ears of all people in the Mall, in the Green Park, in Piccadilly, in Regent Street, in Regent’s Park” (Woolf, 1996, p. 25). Having endured the invasion of sounds from air raids during the First World War, listeners after the war hallucinate the rumble of the commercial airplane as an air raid. Upon hearing the rumble of the airplane, Septimus Smith recalls his traumatic experiences on the battlefield and has hallucinations of hearing a distant combat horn, triggering his post-traumatic stress disorder. The hallucinations caused by the sound of an airplane “would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more” (Woolf, 1996, p. 26).

The horn of a car in the street resonates like cannon fire and triggers Septimus’s auditory hallucinations. Septimus’s mind continuously oscillates between recollections of the wartime period in the past and the stark realities of the post-war era in the present. Woolf uses the past tense to convey his traumatic experiences in the past: “Red flowers grew through his flesh; their stiff leaves rustled by his head” (Woolf, 1996, p. 76). The present tense is employed to describe the origin of the sound: “It is a motor horn down in the street” (Woolf, 1996, p. 76), thus shifting the narrative focus to the present moment. In his auditory hallucinations, the motor horn in the street transforms into music clanging against the rocks “cannoned from rock to rock, divided, met in shocks of sound which rose in smooth columns and becomes an anthem” (Woolf, 1996, p. 76). Fernald argues the red flowers are “the red poppies bloom abundantly in the battlefields that saw some of the heaviest casualties during the First World War”, and “the red poppy has been a symbol of remembrance of the war dead since 1920” (Fernald, 2015, p. 251).

Moreover, Septimus interprets the sound of an old man playing the penny whistle by the public house as a shepherd boy’s piping. This involuntary association invokes poignant traumatic memories of those who were killed in the war. He perceives the penny whistle as an elegy emitting a plaintive sound, like weeping and lamenting. The motor horn and the shepherd’s penny whistle trigger his association of the sounds with scenes of war violence, leading him to fantasize about red flowers blooming as symbolic representations of soldiers’ blood. The motor horn penetrates Septimus’s “reverie to provide a respite that generates highly imaginative comminglings of sight, space, and sound”, while the elegy played by the assumed shepherd boy symbolizes “the trace of death still intrudes upon the Arcadian moment” (Clements, 2019, p. 111). The sounds in the street provoke Septimus’s post-traumatic stress disorder, causing him to feel as if he is “a drowned sailor on a rock” (Woolf, 1996, p. 77). He contemplates the paradox of being both dead and alive simultaneously. In his hallucinations, Septimus even hears Evans speaking “behind the railings” (Woolf, 1996, p. 28), “behind the tree” (Woolf, 1996, p. 78), or “singing behind the screen” (Woolf, 1996, p. 160). Woolf skillfully portrays how Septimus’s auditory responses misconstrue the sounds in the street as the thunderous sounds of cannons, thereby offering a critique of the violence of war.

According to Galtung, structural violence employs “political, oppressive and economic, exploitative” means to distribute

resources and power unjustly (Galtung, 1996, p. 31). This approach serves the ruling class's interests and maintains the social system. The direct violence of war inflicted upon Septimus results in his development of post-traumatic stress disorder, while the post-war structural violence exacerbates his symptoms, ultimately pushing him to commit suicide by flinging himself "vigorously, violently down onto Mrs. Filmer's area railings" (Woolf, 1996, p. 164). In the aftermath of the First World War, the ruling elites of the British Empire consciously chose to disregard the shell shock as a means to evade their responsibility for the war's consequences. Instead, they ascribed the condition to a perceived deficiency in the patients' masculinity and self-control, categorizing it as a social disease. Galtung argues that the ruling class which benefits from the structural violence will attempt to "preserve the status quo so well geared to protect their interests" (Galtung, 1969, p. 179). Dr. Bradshaw in *Mrs. Dalloway*, a representative of the imperial ruling class, supports this viewpoint and employs structural violence to discipline shell-shock patients. His treatment for mental disorders is deeply rooted in an unwavering belief in the sense of proportion. This treatment dictates isolating patients from sounds and prescribing long periods of rest, solitude, and silence. Labeled as the unfit, these individuals suffering from mental disorders are not allowed to "propagate their views" until they share "his sense of proportion" (Woolf, 1996, p. 110). Unfortunately, Bradshaw's treatment fails to alleviate Septimus's symptoms of psychological trauma. On the contrary, it exacerbates his mental breakdown, ultimately driving him to resist the prevailing structural violence through the tragic act of suicide.

Cultural violence: feminist reflections on air raid soundscape

Galtung argues that cultural violence utilizes various cultural symbols, such as "stars, crosses, crescents; flags, anthems, military parades; the ubiquitous portrait of the Leader; inflammatory speeches, and posters" as well as "religion and ideology, language and art, empirical and formal science" to "justify or legitimize direct or structural violence" (Galtung, 1990, p. 291). Woolf contemplates the intricate relationship between cultural violence and war manifested within the soundscape of air raids. In her essay "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid", Woolf employs onomatopoeia like "buzzing" and "sawing" to construct the soundscape of air raids, effectively depicting the traumatic experience of the listeners. She profoundly reflects on the intricate relations between patriarchal culture and war, seeking a path toward peace. Her profound contemplation within the soundscape of air raids not only aligns with Galtung's theory of cultural violence but also resonates with the two auditory responses proposed by two Chinese scholars Fu and Qiu. The auditory response of meditation is "like the key to the character's heart, so the 'stream of auditory consciousness' written by some writers promotes the 'inward turn' of narrative literature" (Fu and Qiu, 2019, p. 33). The auditory response of apprehension "implies that sound can stimulate a breakthrough of the mind, thus the mind sparkling brilliantly in a moment" (Fu and Qiu, 2019, p. 33).

Woolf highlights the close connection between cultural violence and war. Within the soundscape of air raids, the female narrator in "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid" is astutely aware of the role of broadcasting in propagating cultural violence. She acknowledges that the radio serves as a tool for promoting patriotism and nationalism, fueling the recruitment of young people into the army. Galtung argues that cultural violence is perpetuated through various media platforms, utilizing strategies of instruction, persuasion, and instigation, ultimately legitimizing both direct and structural forms of violence (Galtung, 1990, p. 299). During German air raids, the broadcasts of the British

Empire, assuming the role of perpetuating cultural violence, disseminated the message that "we are a free nation, fighting to safeguard our liberty" (Woolf, 1942, p. 244), thereby effectively justifying acts of "war-induced killing carried out under the banner of the 'nation'" (Galtung, 1990, p. 299).

This mainstream current propagated by the media "has whirled the young airman up into the sky and keeps him circling there among clouds" (Woolf, 1942, p. 244). The loudspeaker cries that it is Hitler that prevents humans from getting freedom, characterizing him as embodying "aggressiveness, tyranny, the insane love of power made manifest" (Woolf, 1942, p. 245). These broadcasts assert that the path to peace is to eliminate Hitler through war. Additionally, the British Empire strategically utilizes radio broadcasts to boost the morale of young combatants by showcasing their triumphs against the enemy. The 9 o'clock broadcast announces that "forty-four enemy planes were shot down during the night, ten of them by anti-aircraft fire" (Woolf, 1942, p. 246). Such broadcasts incessantly reverberate in the minds of the young people, fueling their desires to combat the enemies: "To fight against a real enemy, to earn undying honor and glory by shooting total strangers, and to come home with my breast covered with medals and decorations" (Woolf, 1942, p. 246).

Amidst the resonating buzz of the bombers, Woolf adopts the stream of auditory consciousness to depict a female narrator's contemplation on the roots of war violence and how to use the power of media to challenge the prevailing current propagated by cultural violence. The buzzing sounds emitted by the bombers trigger the narrator's recollection of an article published in *The Times* this morning. Agreeing with the article's attribution of war violence to the women's absence of any political voice, the narrator laments that "there is no woman in the Cabinet; nor in any responsible post. All idea-makers who are in a position to make ideas effective are men" (Woolf, 1942, p. 244). The narrator further recognizes that the prevailing current of disregarding women's political voices "damps thinking, and encourages irresponsibility" (Woolf, 1942, p. 244). Within the soundscape of air raids, the narrator attributes "the helplessness of women during air raids to patriarchal culture" (Chen, 2022, p. 42).

Likewise, the piercing sawing sound emitted by the bombers reminds the narrator of another article published in *The Times* this morning by Lady Astor, the first female member of Parliament. Lady Astor comments in this article that women of ability are "held down because of subconscious Hitlerism in the hearts of men" (Woolf, 1942, p. 245). The narrator observes that both males and females are prisoners tonight. Males are boxed up in bombers with guns handy, while females are lying in the dark with gas masks handy. In the narrator's view, the cause of their imprisonment for males lies in the Hitlerism hidden within their subconscious. She points out that the essence of Hitlerism is "the desire for aggression; the desire to dominate and enslave", which is driven by "ancient instincts, instincts fostered and cherished by education and tradition" (Woolf, 1942, p. 246). Similarly, the narrator astutely highlights that women find themselves imprisoned because of their preoccupation with appearances, even in the face of the imminent threat of air raids. The narrator observes "shop windows blazing; and women gazing; painted women; dressed-up women; women with crimson lips and crimson fingernails" (Woolf, 1942, p. 245). From the narrator's perspective, these women are enslaved by patriarchal culture, striving to "dominate and control men through seduction but cannot dominate them because they have no legitimate power" (Andrew, 1994, p. 94).

The auditory response of apprehension entails a profound moment of epiphany ignited by the sound, signifying the capacity of sound to "stimulate a breakthrough of the mind; thus the mind

sparkling brilliantly in a moment” (Fu and Qiu, 2019, p. 33). The soundscape of the air raids triggers Woolf’s epiphany about how to heal trauma and achieve peace by recalling moments of being from memories. Through profound listening in the air raids, the female narrator realizes that the fleeting memories of a pre-war idyllic life possess the potential to dispel the Hitlerism hidden within the male subconscious. This realization offers humanity a vision to transcend the cycle of war violence. In “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, Woolf extracts beautiful moments of daily life stored in recollection, presenting them in a fragmented pattern to emphasize the significance of peace in individuals’ lives. These fragments are from pre-war memories, including “the memory of other Augusts—in Bayreuth, listening to Wagner; in Rome, walking over the Campagna; in London. Friends’ voices come back. Scraps of poetry return” (Woolf, 1942, p. 247). Woolf exhibits that “each of these thoughts, even in memory, was far more positive, reviving, healing and creative than the dull dread made of fear and hate” (Woolf, 1942, p. 247).

Following the cannons’ cease firing, the narrator finds herself hearing once again the peaceful and serene sounds of the countryside, such as “an apple thuds to the ground. An owl hoots, winging its way from tree to tree (Woolf, 1942, p. 43). Wang argues that these symbols of “the apple” and “the owl”, deeply rooted in traditional Western culture, are utilized poetically by Woolf to convey themes of “rebirth, ideals, and hopes” (Wang, 2019, p. 74). These wonderful memories rejuvenated by women possess the capacity to inspire men to “give up fighting and compensate the man for the loss of his gun”, while the peaceful and serene sounds of the countryside can help men “conquer their fighting instinct and heal the civilians’ trauma caused by air raids” (Chen, 2022, p. 44). Woolf employs the juxtaposition between the reemergence of the peaceful and serene sounds of the countryside with the thud of the apple falling and the hoot of the owl. Through this poetic and symbolic approach, she effectively shows the soothing and restorative role played by the countryside sounds in healing the traumas of war.

Conclusion

In the two world wars, Woolf endured the intrusion of weapon sounds and depicted the direct violence inflicted on the public by these sounds in her novels and essays. She also captured the painful memories of war trauma triggered by the soundscape in British streets, exposing the structural violence the First World War soldiers suffered from after the war. In the terrifying soundscape of German air raids on Britain, Woolf gained feminist insight into the intricate relationship between the outbreak of war, cultural violence, and patriarchal norms. She realized through this insight that the fleeting memories of a pre-war idyllic life and the serene sounds of the countryside could serve as a pathway for humanity to distance themselves from the violence of war. After the air raids, Woolf envisioned a new world that emerged after the war, akin to the characters in her novel *The Years*, who raised their glasses to celebrate their survival and the arrival of a new world.

Unfortunately, Woolf did not live to witness the end of the Second World War and the arrival of a new world. Like Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*, she suffered from auditory hallucinations following the outbreak of the First World War and tragically chose to commit suicide in resistance to the violence of war. Before committing suicide, Woolf left a letter to her husband Leonard, saying, “I shant recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and cant concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do” (Lee, 1999, p. 744). She believed there was no prospect of her recovery and succumbed to despair. Woolf’s portrayal of military weapon sounds effectively reveals the direct violence imposed on the

public during the war and serves as a poignant critique of structural and cultural violence.

Woolf’s portrayal and critique undeniably bear immense relevance in contemporary discussions addressing present-day war violence, as vividly exemplified by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. The stark parallels drawn between Woolf’s literary exploration and the lived experiences of the Ukrainian people echo resoundingly the sentiments expressed in her works. Within the enveloping darkness that blankets the listeners in conflict zones, akin to those in Woolf’s narrative, they find themselves subjected to the harrowing sounds of death emitted by missiles, drones, fighter jets, and the like—a haunting auditory reminder of the brutalities of war. In “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, Woolf’s proposition to think against the prevailing current that advocates wars and nationalism takes on renewed significance in the context of this regional conflict. Her plea to cherish fleeting memories of pre-war idyllic life and the serene sounds of the countryside becomes a poignant call to envision peace amid the tumultuous tides of war violence.

Furthermore, the idyllic pre-war life and the serene sounds Woolf proposed in “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid” offer potential insights into shaping the urban soundscape within post-war “peace zones”. Urban architectural planning should prioritize the integration of increased natural elements, such as expansive parks and gardens, alongside the inclusion of natural auditory features like birdsong, rustling winds, and flowing water, to foster an environment conducive to nurturing the inner tranquility of war survivors and facilitating the alleviation of their war-induced trauma.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study. This research does not involve the analysis or generation of any data.

Received: 8 August 2023; Accepted: 20 December 2023;

Published online: 02 January 2024

References

- Andrew B (1994) The Psychology of Tyranny: Wollstonecraft and Woolf on the gendered dimension of war. *Hypatia* 9(2):85–101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1994.tb00434.x>
- Bradshaw D (2003) Winking, Buzzing, Carpet-Beating: Reading *Jacob’s Room*. Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain, Southport
- Brewer LS (1999) “Thinking is my Fighting”: Tracing the Developing Critique of War and Violence in the Fiction of Virginia Woolf. Doctoral Thesis, University of Oregon
- Caruth C (1996) *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore
- Chen WY (2022) Sound Narration of Transportation and Imperial Politics in Virginia Woolf’s Works. Thesis of Master of Arts, Northeast Normal University
- Clements E (2019) *Virginia Woolf: Music, Sound and Language*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto
- Cole S (2012) *At the Violent Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Connor S (1997) The Modern Auditory I. In: Porter R (ed) *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Routledge, London, p 203–223
- Cuddy-Kean M (2000) Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies, and the New Aurality. In: Caughie PL (ed) *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Garland Publishing, New York, p 69–96
- Fernald A (2015) *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Virginia Woolf: Mrs. Dalloway*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Frattarola A (2005) Listening for “Found Sound” Samples in the Novels of Virginia Woolf. *Woolf Stud Annu* 11:133–159
- Fu XY, Qiu ZZ (2019) Sound provoking listening, meditating and apprehending: on the three realms of literary works that describe sounds. *J Jiangxi Norm Univ* 52(2):33–41

- Galtung J (1969) Violence, peace, and peace research. *J Peace Res* 6(3):167–191. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301>
- Galtung J (1990) Cultural violence. *J Peace Res* 27(3):291–305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343390027003005>
- Galtung J (1996) *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*. Sage Publications Ltd, London
- Lee H (1999) *Virginia Woolf*. Vintage Books, New York
- Mosse GL (2000) Shell-shock as a Social Disease. *J Contemp Hist* 35(1):101–108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200940003500109>
- Schafer RM (1994) *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Turning World*. Destiny Books, Rochester
- Van Der Kolk BA, Van Der Hart O (1995) The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma. In: Caruth C (ed) *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, p 158–182
- Varga A (2014) *Virginia Woolf and Music*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis
- Wang Y (2019) War, Feminism, and Narrative in “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”. *N. Perspect World Lit* 6:71–76
- Woolf V (1942) *Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid. The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York
- Woolf V (1977) *The Years*. Fraughton, London
- Woolf V (1979) *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. I: 1915–1919*. Bell AO (ed). The Hogarth Press, London
- Woolf V (1984) *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. V: 1936–1941*. Bell AO and McNeillie A (eds). The Hogarth Press, London
- Woolf V (1987) Heard on the Downs: The Genesis of Myth. In: McNeillie A (ed) *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. II: 1912–1918*. Harvest Book Harcourt, New York, p 40–42
- Woolf V (1992) *Between the Acts*. Penguin Books, London
- Woolf V (1996) *Mrs. Dalloway*. Penguin Books, London
- Woolf V (2000) *Jacob's Room*. Vintage, London
- Xu X (2022) The auditory narrative and lyrical novel in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. *Foreign Lit* 1:119–129. <https://doi.org/10.16345/j.cnki.cn11-1562/i.2022.01.007>
- Zhou L (2022) Music is sound: Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* and the modern music. *Foreign Lit Rev* 3:179–199
- Zhu HF, Shen FY (2014) Virginia Woolf's Ideas of anti-Violence in her Works. *Foreign Lang Educ* 35(2):72–75

Author contributions

HFZ conceived, wrote, and revised the manuscript. HD revised the manuscript. WYC wrote the manuscript. They give final approval for the version to be published and agree to be accountable for ensuring the accuracy and integrity of the work.

Funding

This article is funded by the National Social Science Foundation of China: The Writings of Resistance War against Japanese Aggression by Bloomsbury Group and Chinese Modernist Writers in the UK (Grant number: 20BWW009).

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Haifeng Zhu or Hui Ding.

Reprints and permission information is available at <http://www.nature.com/reprints>

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

© The Author(s) 2024