## Pure War

#### Representations of a catastrophic event of absolute destruction internalize a “pure war” mindset – a perpetual state of preparing for and fearing absolute destruction that devalues life.

Mark Borg, practicing psychoanalyst, graduate of the William Alanson White Institute's psychoanalytic certification program, 2003[“Psychoanalytic Pure War: Interactions with the Post-Apocalyptic Unconscious”, Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society 8.1 (2003) 57-67, project MUSE]

Paul Virilio and Sylvere Lotringer's concept of "pure war" refers to the potential of a culture to destroy itself completely (12). 2 We as psychoanalysts can—and increasingly must—explore the impact of this concept on our practice, and on the growing number of patients who live with the inability to repress or dissociate their experience and awareness of the pure war condition. The realization of a patient's worst fears in actual catastrophic events has always been a profound enough psychotherapeutic challenge. These days, however, catastrophic events not only threaten friends, family, and neighbors; they also become the stuff of endless repetitions and dramatizations on radio, television, and Internet. 3 Such continual reminders of death and destruction affect us all. What is the role of the analyst treating patients who live with an ever-threatening sense of the pure war lying just below the surface of our cultural veneer? At the end of the First World War, the first "total war," Walter Benjamin observed that "nothing [after the war] remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body"(84). Julia Kristeva makes a similar note about our contemporary situation, "The recourse to atomic weapons seems to prove that horror...can rage absolutely" (232). And, as if he too were acknowledging this same fragility and uncontainability, the French politician Georges Clemenceau commented in the context of World War I that "war is too serious to be confined to the military" (qtd. in Virilio and Lotringer 15). Virilio and Lotringer gave the name "pure war"to the psychological condition that results when people know that they live in a world where the possibility for absolute destruction (e.g., nuclear holocaust) exists. As Virilio and Lotringer see it, it is not the technological capacity for destruction (that is, for example, the existence of nuclear armaments) that imposes the dread characteristic of a pure war psychology but the belief systems that this capacity sets up. Psychological survival requires that a way be found (at least unconsciously) to escape inevitable destruction—it requires a way out—but this enforces an irresolvable paradox, because the definition of pure war culture is that there is no escape. Once people believe in the external possibility—at least those people whose defenses cannot handle the weight of the dread that pure war imposes—pure war becomes an internal condition, a perpetual state of preparation for absolute destruction and for personal, social, and cultural death.

#### The pure war culture reshapes the way we psychologically approach war and peace, making all conflict inevitable.

Mark Borg, practicing psychoanalyst, ’03, graduate of the William Alanson White Institute's psychoanalytic certification program, [“Psychoanalytic Pure War: Interactions with the Post-Apocalyptic Unconscious”, Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society 8.1 (2003) 57-67, project MUSE]

Virilio and Lotringer state that "war exists in its preparation" (53). And Sun Tsu, who wrote over 2400 years ago and yet is often considered the originator of modern warfare, said in The Art of War, "Preparation everywhere means lack everywhere" (44). This means that when the members of a culture must be on guard on all fronts, the resources of that culture are necessarily scattered and taxed. The more defenses are induced and enacted, the more psychologically impoverished a culture (or a person) will be. In war-torn nations, resources like food, clothing, and materials for shelter may be scarce in the general population because they are shunted off to the military. Similarly, the hoarding of psychological resources and the constant alert status of the defense system are outcomes of existence in a pure war culture. We can see this scattering and scarcity of resources occurring already in the United States as billions of dollars are shunted from social services to war efforts and homeland security. In pure war cultures—that is, in cultures that enact a perpetual preparation for war—the notion of peace is itself a defensive fantasy, although to survive psychically we distract ourselves from such frightening stimuli as widespread terrorist activities and other events that demonstrate our pure war status. Pure war obliterates the distinction between soldier and citizen. We have all been drafted. According to Virilio and Lotringer, "All of us are already civilian soldiers, without knowing it...War happens everywhere, but we no longer have the means of recognizing it" (42).