



**Cultural Mythmaking of Violence and Power in Alexis Scheer's *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord***

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**Abstract** This paper examines the idea of myth construction as a cultural criticism against ritualized violence. Mythologizing infamous criminal figures such as Escobar is something that is celebrated among teen and young groups. Social media increases this sort of glamorization negatively. Nowadays, individuals with bad influence are celebrated and admired such as Jeffrey Dahmer. They become obsessed with legendary criminal iconography and violence. In Scheer's *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord*, the female characters play nature's order by summoning the ghost of Escobar. The girls' fascination with criminals converts violence into a symbolic lexicon. Through the act of contacting the dead, these teenage girls express belonging, desire for understanding, anger and defiance against social ostracism. Instead of showing violence only as destructive force, Scheer reveals how narco-mythologies that are circulated by media form a young persons's imagination shedding light on how identity is fluid. Scheer examines how easy identity is changeable due to outside forces such as social media, peer pressures and cultural forces. Informed by feminist and cultural theories of performativity, the study argues that the girls' reenactments serve mythopoetic functions that simultaneously reproduce and subvert patriarchal narratives of authority. The American playwright takes it upon herself to make it clear how violence circulates as a cultural fantasy structuring collective desire, exposing vulnerability, anxiety and uncertainty of the outside world.

**Keywords:** culture, Escobar, mythologizing, social media, teenagers

## بناء الأسطورة الثقافية للعنف والسلطة في مسرحية تاجر المخدرات

الراحل العزيز لألكسيس شير

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### المستخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة لتحليل فكرة بناء الأسطورة بوصفها نقدًا ثقافيًا موجَّهًا ضد العنف المُقَنَّ طقوسيًا. إن أسطورة الشخصيات الإجرامية سيئة السمعة مثل إسكوبار تُعدُّ أمرًا يحتفى به بين فئات المراهقين والشباب، كما تسهم وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في تضخيم هذا النوع من التمجيد بصورة سلبية. في الوقت الحاضر، يتم الاحتفاء بأشخاص ذوي تأثير سيئ والإعجاب بهم، مثل جيفري دامر، حيث يصبح هؤلاء محور هوس مرتبط بأيقونات إجرامية أسطورية وبالعنف. في مسرحية «ربنا العزيز، تاجر المخدرات الميت»، تُجسد الشخصيات النسائية نظام الطبيعة من خلال استحضار شبح إسكوبار. إن افتتان الفتيات بالمجرمين يحوّل العنف إلى معجم رمزي تُعبّر من خلاله هؤلاء المراهقات عن الانتماء والغضب والتحدّي في مواجهة الإقصاء الاجتماعي. وبدلاً من تقديم العنف بوصفه قوة تدميرية فحسب، تكشف شير كيف أن الأساطير المرتبطة بعالم المخدرات، والتي تُروّج عبر وسائل الإعلام، تُسهم في تشكيل خيال الشباب، مُسلّطة الضوء على سيولة الهوية. كما تدرس شير مدى سهولة تغيير الهوية تحت تأثير عوامل خارجية مثل وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي وضغوط الأقران والقوى الثقافية. وبالاستناد إلى النظريات النسوية والثقافية للأدائية، تجادل الدراسة بأن إعادة تمثيل الفتيات تؤدي وظائف أسطورية-شعرية تُعيد في الوقت ذاته إنتاج السرديات الأبوية للسلطة وتُفوّضها. وتتولى الكاتبة المسرحية الأمريكية توضيح كيف يدور العنف بوصفه خيالاً ثقافياً يُنظّم الرغبات الجمعية، كاشفاً عن الهشاشة والقلق وعدم اليقين في العالم الخارجي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة، إسكوبار، الأسطورة، وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، المراهقون

### 1- Introduction

Alexis Scheer (1990) is an American playwright, screenwriter and an artist. She is known for mixing political criticism with dark comedy. She presents how violence in the 21st century has become ritualized and something ordinary. Her theatrical frame is characterized by psychological realism. Scheer's dramaturgy echoes ethical messages. Her style is marked by rapid tonal shifts, simple language, humor and moments of sudden atrocities. Scheer's plays bring feelings of unease inside the audience's

hearts. She reveals how violence is taught and transmitted from one generation to the next through cultural tools. Scheer sheds light on individual accountability. This is because her characters reveal how one's identity is structured through myth and social constructions. She raises awareness about one's personal conscience and ethical responsibility in an anchored world. Her language is like contemporary media discourse that is fragmented, ironic and elusive. Violence, in her plays, is practised by ritualistic and primitive acts. Scheer emphasizes on the negative aspects of ritual structures by using them as theatrical tools to critique society. This is evident in her *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* (2021). Secret meetings, ritualistic actions and summoning ghosts highlight her role as a playwright to protest against social evils. Scheer wants to convey the message that teenagers are caught up by the webs of invisible forces making them feel alienated. This is why these girls from the play feel the need to contact a ghost. The female characters desire for a connection. These ritual forms are like whips to lash out at institutional systems such as clubs, classrooms and political movements. Scheer exposes the capability to normalize harm. Scheer is a minimalist in terms of her playwriting, which amplifies the sense of a confined space.

*Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* possesses darkly comic overtones. Humor, for Scheer, is not a moment for the audience to be relieved, but is a device of displacement and a critique. This permits her characters to evade ethical reckoning referring to social hypocrises, political dishonesty and the expectations that are placed on genders. Scheer interrogates the environment of social media in which bad habits and entertainment circulate together. This makes moral decay prevail. Scheer's play centers on four teenage girls who are Pipe, Kit, Squeeze and Zoom. These young girls start a secret club that is known as the Dead Leaders Club. Meeting in a treehouse, the group is caught up by historical and political figures who are associated with power, revolution and notoriety such as "Che Guevara, Pablo Escobar and Hitler" (ODDDL 6-7). It begins as a fun game to rebel against society. Gradually, things escalate into increasingly dangerous acts. What these young girls do like drinking blood of each other and worshipping the portrait of Escobar symbolizes a fascination with violence. Such violence is changed into an enacted violence such as the sacrifices that the girls perform as offerings. Scheer reveals how the inner psyche of the four young girls. This labels

Scheer as an expressionist for focusing on the inner workings of her characters. The girls debate morality, politics and the notion of legacy. Their fascination with Escobar operates less as political critique and more as a projection of adolescent longing for agency giving the play a feminist dimension. They want to summon his spirit to gain control over their lives. The girls are violent, they get involved with doing bad things in which their consequences cannot be erased. They cannot keep what they have disordered in control. They justify their deeds by claiming they are having fun. Scheer wants her audience to confront morality. She chooses to close her play without a clear resolution. The idea of having no sense of finality allows Scheer to condemn social media mythmaking. Rather, the American playwright allows the audience to be suspended in moral doubt. Being controlled by cultural icons make individuals haunted by the false celebrity culture.

## 2- Cultural Mythmaking in American Drama

The act of mythologizing functions as a central mechanism through which American drama negotiates agency, violence, power and national identity. It is related to “Social myths” that “function to interpret the meanings of modern life” (Gilbert et al. 5). Rather than merely highlighting myths, Scheer revises and deforms mythic stories to examine social crisis of how the young generations are dominated. This is depicted in how Pipe, Zoom and Squeeze glamorize the idea of calling for the spirit of Pablo Escobar (1949-1993) calling such act as “hot” (*ODDDL* 3). The act of mythmaking “suggest[s] that the reality of urban life is constructed through its representation, that representation is not epiphenomenal but constitutive” (8). Zoom states that she wants “to be so famous” just like Escobar (7). The French critic, Roland Barthes (1915-1980) argues in his *Mythologies* (1957) that myth is not a false system, but is a mode of signification that “transforms history into nature” (Barthes 129). This sort of metamorphosis allows historically contingent violence to appear inevitable, meaningful and even at times redemptive. This is the sort of image Scheer wants to dismantle. This is a thing that Scheer opposes. Scheer, through a mythic veil, takes apart this cultural fascination with criminals and infamous persons. Such fascination that is magnified through media spectacles should be stopped. This is related to how “Naturally,

everything is not expressed at the same time: some objects become the prey of mythical speech for a while and attain the status of myth” (Barthes 110).

In twentieth-century American drama, myth changes from heroic overtones to an ideological tool to expose society’s faulty acts. Scheer condemns how young teenagers mythologize violence and acts of moral transgression, which are reframed as heroic within youth culture. Squeeze brands Escobar as “sexyyyy” (ODDDL 7). Zoom calls him a “badass” (17). Scheer shows the dangers of teenagers fantasizing about corrupted figures as an act of rebellion. Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) and Arthur Miller (1915-2005) reveal how national myths such as success, moral exceptionalism and the American Dream collapse under the weight of lived experience. Williams in his *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) presents his characters to be living under the influence of myth of the American Dream. Amanda lives in a mythic past and Tom lives in the myth of freedom that can be gained through escaping. He dramatizes his characters who are “rooted in social myths rather than necessities” (Krasner 284). Miller in his *Death of a Salesman* (1949) recasts mythical tragedy within social realism which gives the playwright the chance to explore the “social unconscious” of his characters (284). American drama thus stages myth not as collective inheritance, but as a destructive demand that is placed upon individual’s psyches, “The importation of such rituals from other cultures or attempts self-consciously to identify the iconography of contemporary myth could all too easily become an artificial exercise” (Bigsby 249).

Contemporary American playwrights, like Scheer and Sarah Ruhl (1974), tend to mix mythmaking within youth culture to crystallize doubts that surrounds traditions and the institutions. This act provides Scheer with a zone to comment on society’s deteriorating condition. In her play, Scheer touches upon sensitive issues such as death, peer pressure, sexuality, trauma and crisis of identity. Cultural studies note that young individuals inherit myths and “interrogate cultural production of violence” without historical depth, encountering them instead through mediated fragments and for the sake of having fun (Okorie 25). Mythmaking serves “as a story in which people could connect themselves in time to the past. And thereby connect themselves to the present and the future“ (Krasner 236). Scheer’s *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* reflects this condition by presenting female characters who do not simply commit violence, but also narrativize it into

legend, ritual and rebellion. For the young girls, myth is used as a replacement for real power. Scheer seems to suggest that when individuals do not actually have dominance, stability and authority over their lives, they instead tend to create myths to imagine that power is theirs. Myth functions as a symbolic substitute for authority and “poetics of violence”, enabling the girls to perform whatever acts they desire that their system denies them from (Okorie 25).

Mythmaking in American drama is linked to moral concerns Scheer exposes society constructs villains into Byronic heroes and icons. Escobar in *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* can be linked to Robin Hood illusion. Robin Hood illusion refers to the romanticized belief that violent and criminal figures are morally justified because they redistribute wealth, protect the poor and resist an unjust system. Escobar was known to be benefactor of the marginalized. He built houses and funded communities, while obscuring the fear, corruption and mass death. He aided the lower classes and supported them for his own personal gain. Scheer criticizes societies that construct compensatory myths to make violence emotionally bearable. The play, therefore, exposes the Robin Hood illusion as a narrative strategy that transforms criminal power of Escobar into moral fantasy rather than ethical reality. Scheer blames the audience in the process of advertising of mythmaking. Drama makes individuals “stand on their heads also to shock us into awareness” (Innes 297). Violence, in Scheer’s play, is staged within this framework to dismantle these internalized cultural norms:

(ZOOM and SQUEEZE unfold and spread out a baby blanket onto the floor and create a mini altar in the center of the blanket with rocks, candles, and self-anointed relics. While PIPE takes a piece of chalk, draws a large circle around them all, and turns off the lights.) (*ODDDL* 14)

Scheer seems to oppose the idea of mythmaking in the American society that emerges as an unstable, but powerful force that attempts to make violence meaningful without any ethical groundings. As Gabor Maté writes in his *The Myth of the Normal* (2022), “For better or worse, we humans have a genius for getting used to things” and through this process

“something previously aberrant becomes normal enough that it passes beneath our radar” (19). Myths offer coherence in moments of fragmentation, but they do so at the cost of accountability, for “‘normal’ often means ‘nothing to see here’: all systems are functioning as they should, no further inquiry needed” (Maté 19). Scheer expose this paradox by staging violence not as moral transgression alone, but as a narrative fulfillment to disrupt behavioral patterns. In this sense, she reveals that myth is not something as an inherited truth, but as a cultural mechanism that is fluid. Through this, violence is justified, aestheticized and endlessly re-circulated, much like what Maté calls “our culture’s skewed idea of normality” which becomes “the single biggest impediment to fostering a healthier world” (20). Indeed, what is regarded as objective may in fact be an illusion since “much of what passes for normal in our society is neither healthy nor natural” and once normalized, “it has become, for lack of a better word, normal” (19-20).

### 3- Staging Violence Between Myth, Media and Moral Panic

Various cultures and contemporary media tend to mythologize violence by framing it as justified and admirable, rather than viewing them as fatal effects. Scheer denounces this because of the glaze over the eyes of youngsters blurring the line between reality and illusion. She abhors cultural systems that “valorize domineering and uncivil behavior” and normalize aggression as socially legible (Bowker 136). Through films, radios, music, social media and online storytelling, violent figures are often looked at as Promethean-like figures, being symbols of resistance against tyrannical systems, “equat[e] meaning, understanding, and thought with collaboration, conformity, and complicity in violence” (133). This process gives violence the benefit of the doubt by shifting attention from harm to being indulged in acts of rebellion. The world of social media encourages young audiences to practise violent acts as responses to injustice, to be wild and trendy. In youth subcultures, especially online, violence can become aestheticized which is turned into style, iconography, or narrative drama. This echoes the idea of how cultures “encourage individuals to confuse difficult yet manageable daily frustrations with terrifying, life-threatening catastrophes” (137). Algorithms and viral digital narratives reward scandalous shocking stories turning them into heroic ones. As a consequence, criminals, infamous persons and perpetrators are

transformed into legends rather than being held accountable for their moral decline. This mythologization does not deny violence outright, but suspends judgment in favor of explanation and empathy. Scheer desires an ethical climate that resists the erosion of values. (133). Violence is thus mediated as a language of expression when other forms of agency seem unavailable. In this way, youth cultures and media participate in normalizing hostility by presenting it as understandable, symbolic and emotionally legible.

Violence in *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* is not staged as a spontaneous eruption of cruelty, but as a carefully mediated act that is shaped by narrative desire, collective fantasy and cultural scripts. Zoom, Squeeze, Pipe and Kit do not merely commit violence, but they also prepare, rehearse, narrate and aestheticize it. The teenage girls want to make a sacrifice, so they decide to kill a “chicken” which is according to Pipe “spiritually significant” (*ODDDL* 4). Zoom tells the other girls that she, “brought all these cool stones to make a circle” which possess “supreme/power” (3). Scheer places violence at the intersection of mythic reverence and media saturation, where political icons, crime narratives and adolescent imagination come together. Kit, who is a new member of the dead leader’s club, asks the others about the reason of why they chose Escobar. Pipe tells her that they picked “Hitler” at “first” and summoned his spirit, but then their schoolmates started to call them “Nazis” (5). In this space, violence becomes a tool for meaning-making, allowing the characters to feel momentarily sovereign within a world that takes their agency away.

Scheer shows how myth operates as a narrative shortcut that empties violence of its ethical weight. Escobar, who is invoked throughout the play, is not treated as a historical figure responsible for systemic terror, but as a floating signifier of power, excess, and notoriety. The young girls are “obsessed” about him (20). Escobar’s name is circulated among the girls as figures detached from material suffering, functioning instead as a badge of transgressive authority. The casual assertion that he is “not the guy that mows my lawn” exemplifies how myth collapses moral complexity into ironic distance (*ODDDL* 7). Escobar becomes an image rather than a reality, a mythic avatar through which the girls create fantasies of

domination. The girls do not think about the costs behind their action, which is something that is negatively embedded in history.

Media logic magnifies the framing violence as a flashy thing. Zoom declares, “I’ve done SO much Googling” about Escobar, who is celebrated by the girls for his moral inversion. Escobar’s violence is treated as a spectacle. This is related to the idea of infatuation with transgression, which is heavily criticized by the American playwright herself. The girls’ language echoes the rhythms of true-crime media, viral outrage and performative shock, where extremity becomes synonymous with relevance. Pipe states, “when we are reinstated we’re sticking with Pablo. Part of our presentation is proving that we chose him to learn from history and to immerse ourselves in Colombian culture” (*ODDDL* 30). When the female characters joke, film, reenact and narrate their actions, violence is transformed into content. Scheer exposes how media culture brain-washes young individuals to experience violence not as rupture, but as performance, calibrated for reaction rather than reflection. This is related to how technological progression disorients one’s psyche.

Scheer unmask the idea of misrecognition about the dangers of technology. Zoom says that she learnt how to summon ghosts through “Googling” (*ODDDL* 20). There is no moral panic. Taking responsibility for one’s actions is neglected. Kit reminds her friends of how they got “suspended” because of “drugs” (6). Scheer showcases how these young girls “chose a criminal to worship” (6). Adults and institutions in Scheer’s play do not respond to the systemic conditions that shape the girls’ behavior, but to the symbolic threat it poses. Kit pin points how the American society in the twenty first century suffer from “shitty health insurance” (33). Squeeze thinks that by contacting with Escobar from the grave and beyond, she is defying the system that tells her how to be as a young girl. She says, “the systems and the institutions that run this country were literally built to oppress people” (*ODDDL* 38). The Dead Leaders Club becomes alarming because it disrupts acceptable narratives of girlhood, political and social engagements. Members of this club suggest that women “were suffering overt as well as covert discrimination imposed upon them on the political level” (Furaih 3). According to the four young teenagers, practicing witchcraft and ritualistic rites provokes adults who are around them because it heightens their anxiety of what these females

are capable of. Also, such acts that are committed by the girls destabilizes cultural myths of female innocence and passivity. Scheer stages this panic indirectly, allowing it to surface through defensive jokes, exaggerated justifications and frantic attempts to control their state of being:

(PIPE opens a cigar box and takes out a Ken doll they've turned into Pablo Escobar (Cartel Ken), crosses herself, kisses it, and passes it.

ZOOM does the same. SQUEEZE does the same.

KIT doesn't miss a beat and does the same and then puts him at the center of the altar.) PIPE pulls out a plastic baggie from the cigar box, grabs a pinky-nail full. Kit reaches into the box and strangles chicken. Bones cracking. A tiny death.) (*ODDDL* 17-18)

Zoom wishes to be "so rich one day I have to bury all my money in the yard because there's nowhere else to put it" (6). Zoom does not care about the source of money or how she is going to get it. Greed and mob mentality are attributed to external influences such as media, drugs, ideology. This displacement mirrors real-world responses to youth violence, where explanation takes the place accountability and outrage is replaced by ethical engagement. Scheer thus critiques not only the act of violence, but also the cultural machinery that rushes to narrate it into normality. By staging violence between myth, media and moral panic, *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* exposes how contemporary culture metabolizes brutality into a familiar story. The American playwright begs the question of why violence and the thirst for fame are accepted and justified. In doing so, Scheer forces the audience into an uncomfortable position, not as judges of the characters' actions, but as participants in the same myth-making processes that render violence visible and shareable.

Scheer, in her *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord*, stages ethical reckoning not as judgment or resolution, but as a sustained state of uncertainty. She refuses to offer moral closure to her play. Instead, she reveals how ethical responsibility is destroyed under the weight of collective desire, mediated myth and narrative control. In this sense, Scheer aligns with a tradition of modern drama that, as Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) argues, seeks not to comfort the audience, but to make them "uncomfortable with what they habitually take for granted" (Brecht 71). Ethical reckoning in the play is repeatedly deferred through collective narration. This is obvious when the

girls mention “Heath Ledger” and praise him (*ODDDL* 51). Ledger (1979-2008) was an American actor who died after an overdose of drugs. It is the responsibility of the playwright to doubt such cultures. Squeeze glamorizes celebrities who overdose and die calling ledger a “superstar” (51). The teenage characters in the play are driven according to the herd theory and the virtual world of social media for their “judgment disappears” (Arendt 276). The girls’ choice of words reframes violence as narrative necessity, rather than moral failure. Pipe declares, “love and violence come from the same place” (*ODDDL* 32). Moments of hesitation are quickly overridden by collective reassurance and jokes. Scheer’s ethical intervention lies precisely in her refusal to interrupt this process. She examines “truth, power and the individual ethics” (Douglas 232). Unlike realist drama, which often stages confession and punishment as a sort of poetic justice, *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* withholds such moments entirely. Instead, Scheer constructs an ethical vacuum in which the audience must confront their own desire for explanation and justice. She uses the technique of shake and shock. The absence of adults and authorial correction in the play become an ethical tool in itself.

For ages, myth-making has symbolized a powerful tool for encoding and normalizing the mistreatment of women. Female figures are casted into restrictive archetypes such as the temptress, the obedient wife, the dangerous witch. Such depictions are meant to control behavior and justify regulation over women’s bodies and voices. When the girls succeed in summoning the ghost of Escobar, he tells them “powerful woman is a dangerous woman” (*ODDDL* 76). Escobar informs them that women who defy the system have been called “witches” who are “drowned in the lake and burned at the stake”(76). He refers to patriarchal narratives that idealize silence, sacrifice and purity in women. Scheer recognizes mythic storytelling that diminishes women’s subjectivity, reducing them to subordinates. Even when women possess power, it is portrayed as dangerous and corrupting. Over time, such sexist myths become internalized, which is a thing that Scheer criticizes. The playwright’s role is to expose how violence, abusing drugs become narratively manageable as a part of everyday life. Zoom devalues “mental illness” by saying “just because your dad killed himself doesn’t mean you like OWN depression” (*ODDDL* 44). Scheer’s play forces the audience to witness, reflect and reckon with their own interpretive participation. The audience “must

become the Character: possess him, take his place – not obey him, but guide him, show him the path they think right” (Boal xx–xxi).

## Conclusion

Scheer’s *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* exhibits how violence, hunger for power and the glaze over the eyes in contemporary culture are not isolated features, but are products of mythmaking, the world of social media, and ethical deferral. Through ritualized actions and collective narratives, Scheer reveals that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, violence should be accountable. She uncovers and exposes how myths are not only an imbedded belief in persons’s psyche, but also are an active cultural habit that is practiced, which affects and reshapes the present time. By denying moral closure, Scheer frames ethical reckoning as a continuing demand rather than settled outcome. She makes the audience share the complicity of a witness whose interpretive engagement mimics that of the characters’ own narrative rationalizations. By staging adolescent violence without redemption and punishment, the play rattles dominant paradigms of blame and innocence. In the end, Scheer confirms theatre’s fickleness for throwing its audiences up against their complicity in cultural mythmaking.

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