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SAVAGES

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School of Language and Culture

A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing

This thesis consists of practice-led research in the form of a full-length script for a feature film; plus a 6000-word essay (exegesis). A summary of the script is as follows:

> Unscrupulous mogul Victor Sloane is dying. Eldest daughter Piper gathers her siblings - competitive twins Hermes & Homer, basket case Gretchen, delinquent artist Sid - to pay a visit. They are resistant, but Piper knows how to manipulate them into coming. Victor, tasks each of his children with finding as many people as possible to speak at his funeral in praise of his glory, as befitting someone of his stature. Whoever does the best will be made his heir. The other four will lose everything.
>
> The siblings split off to do their best against overwhelmingly negative public opinion, however they constantly are at war and are so out of touch with the lives of the ordinary person that they end up doing more harm than good. Piper is the only one competent enough to achieve Victor's goal. At the funeral, he unveils his new robotic form to the world, names Piper his heir, and imprisons the other four for their failings. As the other four develop a family bond in imprisonment, Piper begins to realize her mistake and the hollowness of her life. she rescues her family and attempts to connect with them, as they are faced with the question of what to do with their immortal megalomaniac father.

The script is framed by an Exegesis which is a 6000-word essay on the subject of:

> (a) the genre of the script
> (b) the development process from synopsis to second draft

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Attestation of Authorship:

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

SIGNED: _____

EXEGESIS

THE CONTEXT

Here follows a discussion and comparison of a selection of films with regards to context, culture, and genre to provide insight into the new screenplay discussed in the second half (THE CONTENT). *Savages* is a story of a wealthy family torn apart by their father's cruelty and mistreatment. They come together in an attempt to preserve their wealth but end up finding an unexpected connection with each other. The texts examined and compared in detail here will be *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, written by Yorgos Lanthimos and Efthymis Filippou; *Happy End,* written by Michael Haneke; *Catfight,* written by Onur Turkel; *The Square,* written by Ruben Östlund; and television dramedy *Succession,* created by Jesse Armstrong.

The main commonality here is that these all have elements of black comedy and satire, in particular satire about wealth, corruption and power. Stories about the corruption of power are timeless. 'I am King.' Creon says, 'and responsible only to myself' (Sophocles, trans. 1947) This is in Sophocles' *Antigone,* from 441BC, in a conflict between Creon, the Theban king, and Haemon, his morally conflicted son. Sophocles, intending to compare the clash between moral law and written law, also delved into a potent examination of the abuses of power it is possible for an autocrat to commit against a state. Shakespeare examined similar themes through a range of his characters: King Lear, Richard of Gloucester, Macbeth (to name but a few). These stories from antiquity through to the early modern era almost entirely focus on the rights and responsibilities of kings - men whose power was gained either by birth or (occasionally) misdeed. These stories served the social and political role of examining what qualities were necessary in a good leader, as well as arming the populace with the signs of what qualities define a bad one. Elizabeth I was purported to, in private conversation, have said 'I am Richard II, know you not that?', a reference to Shakespeare's play about the deposition and assasination of the spendthrift wayward king (Scott-Warren, 2012).

This story archetype shifted gear, much as the rest of the world did also, with two major developments of the 19th and 20th century - the industrial revolution, and the birth of the cinematic medium. Here was a time where power was not merely inherited through bloodline or

seized military might. It was the almighty dollar which gave individuals and states alike control over life and death over the common person. And cinema, the most commercial storytelling medium to exist up until this point, was extremely interested in examining this concept of wealth, capital, and the power it bestowed. Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* is a peak example, examining the rise, fall, life, and death of media magnate Charles Foster Kane. Laura Mulvey argues that *Citizen Kane* was laced with double meaning and a critique of America's isolationist stance which won them the economic advantage in both World Wars: 'the destiny of isolationism is realised in metaphor: in Kane's own fate, dying wealthy and lonely, surrounded by the detritus of European culture and history' (Mulvey, 1992). This torch of subtle criticism was kept lit right through to the excess of the 1980s where in *Wall Street* we were met with the mantra of the suitably reptilian (in name and nature) Gordon Gekko: 'Greed is good.' (Pressman & Stone, 1987) The focus in the 1980s was the excess of those at the top - big hair, big suits, big money, big cars. It is of course no coincidence that the biggest eras of film-making for critique of wealth were so closely tied to periods of economic downturn - namely the stock market crashes of 1929 and 1987. Audiences, it seems, may be more receptive and critical of their financial betters when their mistakes begin to affect them directly.

This criticism of capitalist inevitability carried through the 1990s culmination in legendary paeans to slackerdom such as *Fight Club* and *Office Space* - the message overwhelmingly being 'quit your job, it's meaningless anyway.' But aside from the oft-misread satirical 1980s throwback *American Psycho* in 2000, by the turn of the millennium the class anger of the 1980s had all but died out. Mainstream and independent cinema at this point perpetuate inequality. Sherry Ortner assesses the state of media at this point that 'the world of neoliberal business is a world in which amorality, immorality, and often illegality have come to seem "normal." The workplace is a dog-eat-dog world where everyone wears a mask of geniality and stabs the next person in the back at the nearest opportunity' (Ortner, 2013) The early 2000s were very much dominated by a fashion of idolising wealth and celebrity - to be critical was not allowed, and not even the housing market crash of 2008 could jolt the status quo. Angelique Haugerud notes that 'the widening gulf between the ultra-rich and the rest was one of the most important issues

seldom mentioned during the US presidential campaigns of 2000, 2004, and 2008' and it wasn't until Occupy Wall Street and the 2012 campaigns that public criticism of the wealthy became widespread (Haugerud, 2012). Hollywood was slow to catch on to this - even though Martin Scorsese's *Wolf of Wall Street* from 2013 purported to scathingly critique white collar crime and corporate greed - it is more concerned with excess and revelling in the fun of its 1980s throwback, and does little to examine the pain, alienation, and isolation caused by such a lifestyle. Thomas A. Salek ascribes this to existing public opinion: 'Despite projecting a horrific portrait of Wall Street greed, the film's cultural reception demonstrates a public ambiguously mesmerized by a wealthy individual and his 'get rich quick' philosophy' (Salek, 2018). However, it's hard to lay the blame solely with an amoral, greedy audience when *Wolf of Wall Street* does make being rich look incredibly fun. Who can blame an audience for wanting to be the man married to Margot Robbie struggling to get into his sports car because of all the drugs he's taken rather than the good, noble detective sadly riding the train home once his hard-won case is over?

It is no coincidence then that the five texts to be examined here all come from the same rough recent 48-month period, from 2016-8. This particular kind of cinematic criticism, though with roots firmly planted in cinematic history, is in a particular kind of golden age. This thread is almost returning to the beginning of the circle; where once these stories criticised royals and their heirs, we are again in an age where luck of birth once again applies, as tales of children of the wealthy running rampant are abundant (both abroad and locally. Drawing a comparison between, say, former New Zealand Prime Minister's son Max Key and, say the children of President Donald Trump may seem cheap but they are enabled by the same mechanism.) Now the acquisition of wealth is treated as not a goal to be evaluated on a moral scale, it is simply an inevitability. It is as if these texts are saying 'yes, we have built a system ruled by oligarchal capitalist family units… now what?'

It is worth noting that an overwhelming majority of these texts are not American. *The Square and Happy End* critique the cultures of their countries of origin respectively, whereas *Succession*

and *Sacred Deer* both apply a British lens to the economic and moral decay of America. Hollywood is notoriously bad at any serious self-reflection and tend to shy away from it the moment they approach the necessary questions (much as the protagonists of a certain satire about the folly of wealth back away from the emotional revelations holding them back from connecting as a family), so it is perhaps telling that the most lucid insights gained into this worldview are from a different milieu. Hannah Mackay, writing about *Succession,* makes the point that the traditional American depiction of power is 'in its most potent, aphrodisiacal form – and the people who have it... all-seeing Machiavels. The Roys are not Machiavels but, for the most part, hopeless incompetents' (Mackay, 2019). Tukel's *Catfight* stands out from the five with a flourish of American independent obviousness - Veronica's 'crazy' aunt Charlie has named trees in her front garden Hilary, Bernie, and Donald. In drawing this parallel, Tukel clearly places *Catfight* as a product of the 2016 Presidential election season, and a viewing three years into a Trump presidency is strange to say the least. Hannah McGill asserts that the escalation of Middle Eastern war in the film is a sign that 'the film seems to have been completed on the understandable assumption that a hawkish Clinton presidency was on the way' (McGill, 2017), though with recent military actions against Iran, Tukel's satirical dystopia of a warmongering America isn't far off our truth. By contrast, *Succession* avoids any obvious name-checks or signposting, to the point where several media outlets have attempted to dissect the real-world sources of inspiration (Robinson, 2019 & Dangremond, 2018 & Storey, 2019). It therefore succeeds in remaining universal and therefore a more effective critique and satire.

Succession and *Happy End* both feature a clear patriarchal figure with which to diagnose a family's financial gain and consequent moral decay: *Succession*'s bluntly-named Logan Roy and *Happy End'*s Georges Laurent. Their very presence is toxic to the family environment. Georges, in some perverse way, recognises this, where Logan does not. *Succession* opens with Logan's ill health, and the titular succession becomes the key dramatic question throughout season one, answered by his decision to not step down and instead maintain his iron grip on power. The key dramatic question of *Happy End* is quite the opposite - Georges, the cause (or at least a part of the cycle) of his family's distance and misery, seeks to end his life. His suicide attempts are

played for comedy as he awkwardly propositions his barber or a group of refugees on the street to help in his cause, and it is only Eve, the youngest and most recent product of the damaged clan, who is able to find connection with him over this, with suicidal tendencies herself. She has 'correctly zeroed in on her own expendability and the core attitudes of people who hold nothing dear but themselves' (Abeel, 2018) In this lifestyle, there are only two options for patriarchs - death, in Georges Laurent's case, and it can't come quick enough - or an abject refusal of death in Logan Roy's case.

The Square and *Killing of a Sacred Deer* both have a similar protagonist. Male, middle-class, ostensibly respectable and wealthy but ultimately powerless and impotent in terms of their fate. In cardiac surgeon Stephen Murphy's case, the central thematic question seems to be why does a man like this hold life and death in his hands? 'A surgeon can never kill a patient' he bluntly insists: 'An anaesthesiologist can kill a patient, but a surgeon never can.' This inability to confront the truth and consequence of his actions is what renders him a suitable target Martin's cosmic justice.' In *The Square,* Museum curator Christian also does his best to avoid culpability - when he is confronted by journalist Anne after they have spent the night together, and she accuses him of using his position to prey on young women and all he can do is squirm. Later, he tries (and fails) to get his assistant to go into an impoverished apartment block to post his threatening letters with the excuse that he is 'kind of a recognisable face.' Both Christian and Stephen are spawn of the upper-middle class. With enough money to make sure that most problems go away, but not so much money that their position is guaranteed. Most of the comic and dramatic tension comes from them saving face or grasping at straws to maintain their comfortable position.

Though satirical, the majority of these texts find grounding in the real world. Happy End plants its family of industrialists above the 'migrant jungle' of Calais (Grundmann & Naqvi, 2017), *Succession* takes many of its plot points from major headlines, and the major deviation from the real world in *The Square* is that the art gallery where it takes place is the 'X-royal', a gallery built in the former royal palace after the abolition of the monarchy. *Catfight* and *Killing of a*

Sacred Deer, on the other hand, both operate on a level of absurdity that distinguishes them from the others. *Sacred Deer* borrows from Greek drama, specifically Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, and delves into the supernatural and the uncanny. Ryan Gilbey described it, aptly but perhaps anachronistically, as 'a tale of Old Testament revenge presented in the manner of a business transaction' (Gilbey, 2017). Stephen's inability to change his fate is a metaphor for the ineptitude of the upper-middle class when it comes to matters of life and death. The second scene of the screenplay is Stephen and anesthesiologist Matthew washing blood from their hands after surgery, before transitioning to a two-page discussion about the benefits of different watches, Lanthimos' trademark deadpan dialogue here serving to further show the disconnect between the very important life-changing surgery being performed and the detached attitude of the medical professionals. But Stephen, like Pontius Pilate, can't merely wash his hands of an operation gone wrong: here Martin lingers as a visual reminder of his past mistake that just won't go away. *Catfight,* for a further point of difference, offers a violent slapstick as metaphor. Tukel extrapolates American politics from the middle of the 2010s into what can feel like an extended episode of *Itchy & Scratchy,* and when former school friends Veronica and Ashley run out of things to say, after conversation laden with microaggression after microaggression and dig after dig, the only thing to do is start swinging fists, with fights that frequently cross the line twice, even three times, pinballing rapidly between sickening and slapstick, horror and hilarity.

All texts feature some element of transgressive violence. In *Happy End, Succession and Sacred Deer,* the line crossed is a family one, whereas in *Catfight* and *The Square* it is violence across class lines. When Anne Laurent breaks son Pierre's finger at her wedding to stop him making a scene, all she can offer is a Gallic shrug and a 'well, what else could I do?' This is concurrent with Georges' Eve-assisted suicide attempt, and *Happy End* begins as it ends - Eve impassively filming a moment of familial loss on her cellphone. The title of *Sacred Deer* refers, in one sense, to Martin's father, killed off-screen in surgery due to Stephen's incompetence. Martin's cosmic justice requires that Stephen own up and offer up the lives of one of his family as a sacrificial penance, but he is unable to commit to the decision and resorts to spinning blindly firing a rifle at random. Both Haneke and Lanthimos are operating at the extreme, Haneke in particular

suggesting here that the acquisition of wealth is in itself a violent act and that hidden under a carefully curated system of manners and propriety, the upper classes are mercenaries and despots. Similarly, Chris Barsanti asserts that *Sacred Deer* operates on the maxim that 'Behind every great McMansion there must be a great crime' (Barsanti, 2017). *Succession'*s violence generally takes a more realistic route, such as when Logan dismissively hits son Roman across the face and his siblings leap to his defence, with the subtextual implication that this has characterised much of the Roy children's upbringing- Roman, though slimy and conniving ('slime puppy' as he's referred to by mentor and occasional sexual partner Gerri Killman), remains endearing to an audience through his very clearly displayed traumas and issues. Of course the violence isn't merely internal. The season one finale, where Kendall Roy's drug habit costs the life of a waiter at a Roy family function and is subsequently covered up (modelled on the Chappaquiddick incident with Ted Kennedy) shows that to the Roy family, anyone beneath them is expendable. The violence in *Catfight* is deeply rooted in class anger . It is Veronica who swings the first blow as a response to Ashley's slight against her parenting, a major insecurity of hers, sparking the titanomachy that follows. Veronica in making the attack is very much punching down, belittling her for being a caterer and using drugs, but ultimately comes off worse in the fight and after a two year coma finds herself on the pointy end of a reversal of fortune - the for-profit hospital has drained her bank account, her husband killed himself, and her son is dead after enlisting in the military, and the subsequent fights are petty, meaningless bouts of revenge for the damage done in fights past. They are given chances to opt out, and make amends, and we are teased with the possibility of this, but Tukel's point is that this is never going to happen. Violence permeates *The Square,* but strangely between advertising videos featuring children being blown up and installation pieces where an artist pretends to be apes and attacks the one percent who have come to watch , the most transgressive piece of violence is Christian pushing a boy down the stairs for threatening to 'cause chaos' for him. The boy cries for help, but when Christian checks later he has vanished, as has his family. Christian's problem has solved itself, but he has to live with the moral consequences for himself.

In a way, the least violent of the texts is *Happy End,* and that's only if you follow Haneke's thesis that the least violent thing for a wealthy patriarch to do is turn violence on himself and opt out, rather than continue to perpetuate the cycle and be clinging to your position. And what does the character from the younger generation do as he does this? She films it on her phone, to the distress of the rest of the family as they arrive to help. But documenting the sins and traumas of the past is all the younger generation can do if they are to possibly learn and grow.

Tales of corrupted wealth and power abound through western literary and cinematic history. *Savages* and the films examined here occupy a position on the downward curve of the parabolic arc of this story archetype. At this point, in the late 2010s, the wealth of certain groups is taken as an unfortunate truth- but the acquisition of such wealth is looking increasingly less desirable. Established things dissolve, dynasties end. So might the world, soon, at this rate, at least in the form we've been conditioned to understand. Sheila O'Malley reviewed *Catfight*'s worldview with the observation that 'civilization is an extremely fragile veneer over a pit of seething venom. It doesn't take much for that veneer to crack' (O'Malley, 2017). These films are fundamentally political, and when executed successfully are political in a way that operates outside of partisan schools of thought. Whether they are using absurdity, violence, or hypocrisy to examine the wealthy, be it aging moguls or slippery upper-middle class social climbers, it is clear that what works best for these stories is what gets the best results for the characters in them. Boldness, confidence, and flagrant disregard for the rules and safety.

THE CONTENT

SYNOPSIS

Unscrupulous mogul Victor Sloane is dying. Eldest daughter Piper gathers her siblings - competitive twins Hermes & Homer, basket case Gretchen, delinquent artist Sid - to pay a visit. They are resistant, but Piper knows how to manipulate them into coming. Victor, tasks each of his children with finding as many people as possible to speak at his funeral in praise of his glory, as befitting someone of his stature. Whoever does the best will be made his heir. The other four will lose everything.

The siblings split off to do their best against overwhelmingly negative public opinion, however they constantly are at war and are so out of touch with the lives of the ordinary person that they end up doing more harm than good. Piper is the only one competent enough to achieve Victor's goal. At the funeral, he unveils his new robotic form to the world, names Piper his heir, and imprisons the other four for their failings. As the other four develop a family bond in imprisonment, Piper begins to realize her mistake and the hollowness of her life. she rescues her family and attempts to connect with them, as they are faced with the question of what to do with their immortal megalomaniac father.

WORLD

Savages is set in New Zealand, contemporary but, say, twenty minutes into the future - far enough that life-extending technology has developed to a point where it can be used but not so far that it's cheap, widespread, or even known about. This world, much like our own, is a world where wealth is a superpower allowing you to achieve essentially any material goal. The Sloanes are immune to the problems of the common folk, but with their wealth comes an inability to connect with other people, be it family members or people beneath them. Everyone is merely a pawn on a chessboard.. As employers, they hold the power, and employees must be subject to abuse from them because the need to meet basic needs and make a living is too strong.
So their family home is lavish and cutting-edge, but devoid of life and care - the children haven't lived there in years and the servants have been chased away by mistreatment so the place has

somewhat fallen into disrepair. It is located in a fictional satellite suburb of Auckland - (here named ‘Onetahae’, or ‘stolen beach’), modelled off places such as Piha, Matakana, or Omaha - a peaceful haven for the wealthy, removed from the inner-city concerns of the common people but still only a short drive away from the CBD for when it’s time to do business.

In a similar sense, the company headquarters reflect this abusive relationship between the wealthy and their subordinates. It is bugged and surveilled, watched over by the paranoid tyrant Victor Sloane, his Vice-President sons are largely absent, leaving employees with the bulkload of the work, and the employees have developed a coping mechanism of privately celebrating in their hatred of their employers.

The rest of the social environment can be categorised by their relationship to the two roles of wealthy abuser and destitute abused. Some are young folk still finding their way into this brutal loveless world, such as Poppy and Paige, who are already dipping their toes into roles of abuser and abused, but with their youth still have the potential to find a way out. Others are opportunistically trying to game the system to get themselves ahead, like journalist Cane Crabs. And then outsiders, like Hannah, do as much as they can to opt out. They perhaps feel a little strange, a little alien, but ultimately their refusal to play along with the status quo means they find themselves happier, healthier, and better people.

THEME

Savages is about the incompatibility of wealth with human connection. It hazards an answer to the question ‘if people are fundamentally good, why are some people billionaires and why are billions of people suffering, impoverished.’ The impulse for writing this was twofold - on one level, a political act - art should be about questioning the status quo and trying to push for a change, in this case to present a counter-narrative to the prevailing Western success story of ‘work hard, earn money, get to the top of the pile, step on who you need, and you will be happy’. Secondly, the aim was to tap into a rich vein of storytelling dating back to antiquity - to tell a timeless tale with leaves in the present but its roots very much in the past. The original images and legends that shaped this story came from a wide variety of sources - Jacob’s Blessing in Genesis 49, Zeus’s deception and subsequent defeat of his father Kronos in Greek myth,

Vladimir Umanets' 2012 defacing of a Rothko at the Tate Modern to start an art movement, King Lear's challenge to his children in Shakespeare's play of the same name, the Sky City fire of 2019, Lee Harvey Oswald's funeral. All stories of hubris and folly and birthright and family and duty.

Intellectually, the audience will see the futility and self-harm inherent in chasing the goal of wealth. Through satire, the audience will be shown the grotesque truth behind the 'ideal' life pushed by the capitalist status quo. Emotionally, the audience will experience both sides of the grotesquerie - the humour and the pain. They will laugh at the horrorshow, in the same way one may laugh at a foolish clown who keeps standing on rakes and getting hit in the face, but never learning to walk around them. But there will be a degree of realisation and human understanding for anyone trapped in the financial cycle of abuse (because in the 21st century it's hard not to be.)

A key image from *Savages* that encapsulates all of the above is when Victor presents his new, robotic form at his own funeral and the crowd runs in fear. The delusions of the upper class, the horror and pain of the underclass, the sadistic glee of his long-suffering wife, the uncanny and inhuman lengths the wealthy will go to in order to put themselves above others, and the debasement of a place of peace, family, and spirituality in the name of a PR stunt all coincide to underline the central message: what the <u>hell</u> are we letting these people get away with?

PROTAGONIST

The protagonist of *Savages* is the five Sloane siblings as a group, but the audience identity figure, at least initially, is eldest sister Piper. She is the cohesive force holding them together as a unit, is the most well-balanced, least chaotic, is smart, and knows how to get what she wants. The goal for the Sloane siblings is the one set by their dying father - reverse the family's bad press. Get the people of the country to like them. When their father returns from the dead and it's hailed by the general public as a miracle, they will have won, whereas they will lose if they are unable to affect a change. Furthermore, to provide more motivation, Victor's decree includes a

caveat that only the one of them to affect the most change will receive the award - the others will be exiled from the family and lose everything.
Consequently their strategies to achieve this are incoherent and self-destructive, signalling their inability to understand the mindset of the average person; the concept of 'good press' is anathema to them and they have zero understanding of how people outside their circle live their day-to-day lives. Furthermore, only Piper has the cunning to try and get around Victor's restriction that only one of them may win - without her their competitive instincts would render any progress impossible, as demonstrated by their first attempts, spending more time trying to sabotage each other than building anything meaningful.

What they come to realise is that the thing they need is to come together as a family unit. They have been conditioned into this way of behaviour, and whoever wins and gets to keep the money and live separated from their siblings with their immortal father will have it worse off.
They are blind to this. The audience will not be. When Piper 'wins' the contest due to her inability to confront the harm her father has done to her and others, it is no victory at all, and she realises this in a moment of *anagnorisis* viewing her trapped family bonding and enjoying themselves. She soon seeks out the other four to make amends and set things right. The stakes raise every time it becomes clear to the protagonists and the audience that this challenge from their father is a no-win situation and they need to find an alternative way out from his clutches.

As *Savages* is operating in the territory of black comedy/satire, the concept of protagonist change is hard to parse. Frequently they will tip-toe up to the line of an emotional realisation, only to pull away from it or opt out of it at the last minute, allowing the audience to fill in the emotional black hole for themselves. The biggest development is not necessarily them becoming better people, but learning to love and appreciate each other. They trauma-bond as a messed-up family, because no one else in the world is capable of coming close to understanding their situation. With what we've seen of how they behave towards others, that's probably a scary thought. Of course their methods for coming together are brutal and questionable, even delving into the mythical. When Cronus defeated and castrated his tyrant father Ouranos, he was greeted with a

prophecy that his own son would do the same to him, causing him to sink into his own brand of tyranny before being usurped by his son Zeus. So in their own way, they break the cycle of abuse by turning it back on their abuser. Questionably empowering for sure, but the threat of change has always been present. Will this family dinner help them come together? Will they help each other when they fall? The audience is constantly being teased with the idea that, maybe one day, these people could be a happy, functioning family. Audrey, denied her youth and denied agency throughout her life is incapable of being a mother - Piper may be capable of being a benevolent surrogate parental figure, but could risk descending into the parental tyranny Victor has indoctrinated her with. In many ways the Sloanes are better off looking for a new family model, one which doesn't allow a tyrant to rein.

ANTAGONIST

The primary antagonistic force, as in all group protagonist films, comes from within the group itself. Their internal conflict and their inability to pull together to achieve anything useful or meaningful without significant intervention or leadership from within, and even that is often short-lived. It is only when they hit their lowest point, and are exiled from the family (or in Piper's case separated from her siblings) where they have no choice but to lean on each other for support, that the destructive tendencies begin to be stripped away and they learn to be capable of connecting with and relying on each other.

It will become clear soon enough that the true antagonist all along has been Victor - he is not only the one who proposed the original goal with the intention of keeping them separated, but subtextually his parenting is a major cause of all of their trauma, flaws, quirks, and inability to connect with each other. His perversion of the natural order - of artificially extending his role as tyrannical father past the point of his organic death - serves only to further highlight this monstrous antagonism. In the third act it becomes clear the true monster they must defeat - their father and his legacy. They must find some way of making a choice that changes their life for the better (and, perhaps, the world.)

Other, secondary, antagonistic forces manifest as consequences of the overwhelming public ill will towards the Sloane family - these include journalist Cane Crabs, disgruntled employees Julio and Morgan, and Gretchen's false friends. These represent obstacles where the financial credit possessed by the Sloanes is outweighed by negative social credit- they are forced to change either by finding new ways of dealing with someone that don't involve buying them out, or getting to know them well enough to find their weak spots.

THE DRAMATIC QUESTION

The central dramatic question is tied to Victor's plans for death and resurrection, and the shape the family will take in response to this.

The first sequence sets this up, demonstrating the Sloanes' expensive lifestyles concurrently with their mistrust of any kind of family bonding. So when Victor gives his ultimatum - that they must find a way to be liked and only one of them will remain in the family with him - at first an audience is assessing if any of them are capable, or in fact worthy of such a reward. What becomes clear is that this task is one that requires emotional intelligence, which is not something any of them possess, and they are all similarly loathsome (Victor included) that things going to plan seems unlikely. So now an audience is watching the choices that this family will make to shape their future in the face of this impossible goal.

The moment of truth here is when Piper gathers her wayward siblings in the aftermath of a disaster into a group to work together. Now an audience invests in this group and it becomes a battle of keeping the team together, on-task, and achieving the necessary goals to become a family again.

The end section is when it becomes clear that Victor's continued existence is incompatible with the concept of family, as he exiles them and splits them up. The question is answered when they, together with their mother, resolve that he must pay for the damage he's done.

THE CHARACTER QUESTION

The emotional suspense in *Savages* comes from the central question: will these people ever be able to comfortably come together and stay together as a family? The problem with the Sloanes is that they are unable to see the concept of 'family' as anything other than a warzone.

The first sequence sets up the fractured state of the Sloane family and the consequences that they are having on the world around them - entitlement, damage, manipulation, and devil-may-care attitudes abound. When they all climb into a car together and immediately begin bickering (followed by the drop of the title card) it becomes clear that these five are the savages of the title, and cannot currently coexist without destroying each other.

After Victor's proclamation - that there will only be one winner, one heir - this is a point of no return. The uncomfortable equilibrium of the fractured Sloanes all living their own private financially buoyant consequence-free lives is over, and now they must navigate the shared territory of Victor's game. The audience is teased with potential avenues for change. Will this challenge bring them together or drive them further apart? Will one sibling triumph over the others? An audience, like the Sloanes, receive answers to this as they begin to see how incompatible they are with the rest of society.

In particular, when Gretchen, Homer, Hermes and Sid spend a night on the streets haphazardly giving wealth away, they develop a closeness as they can see how they might rely on each other - Piper on the other hand takes an opportunity to seize control over an aspect of her development denied her by Victor's intrusiveness, and opts instead for a night of passion with a near-stranger - an important development to be sure, but the morning after she discovers that despite breaking Dad's rules rules she is not free from the bonds of the Sloanes - she is emotionally distant, damaged, and only another Sloane will be able to understand her properly. She makes further mistakes when she is unable to identify the source of her trauma, choosing to side with her father over her siblings. Piper is the final missing puzzle piece in the family's evolution, and has to work hard to save the group from the brink of destruction.

The key defining moment, wrapping up the emotional and the action lines is the penultimate scene where they are able to connect with their distant mother, anticipate each other's emotional

needs, and resolve to destroy their lich of a father. As the genre suggests they shouldn't change too much, they still see the concept of family as a warzone, the most important change however is that they are now on the same side, and weaponizing their inherent destructiveness to a cause they can all agree on.

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