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Subject: A Gratuitous and Indulgent Rhetorical Analysis of The King of Staten Island

INTRODUCTION

September 11 is a pinnacle event in history. As with many historical events, when it comes to the culture of the United States, there is a before and after. The live footage available of the aftermath of the attacks, the consequential war that followed, the change of perception of patriotism, rise in Islamophobia¹ and the mythos around the event, such as conceivable conspiracies, led to a complete shift in our country's priorities and concerns as individuals. This arguably influenced none more so than American Millennials, who in their impressionable youth saw the world around them change without being an agent in that shift. There is plenty of artistic evidence of the generational traumas that have touched the creators in projects. But few do so with as much subtlety as *The King of Staten Island*², especially considering the length in which its co-writer, star, and inspiration Pete Davidson has always publicly expressed his issues with those traumas. *The King of Staten Island* effectively establishes how its protagonist's individual journey correlates with the experiences of the Millennial generation, using the context of its star's background to do so.

THE KING OF STATEN ISLAND

The King of Staten Island is a semi-autobiographical movie written by Pete Davidson, Dave Sirus, and Judd Apatow and directed by Judd Apatow. It takes from Pete Davidson's personal experiences of losing his father at a young age, causing lasting emotional and mental issues due to that grief while living in Staten Island. While the events of the film are not specifically based on Davidson's life, the protagonist Scott, named after Davidson's real life father, is modeled after Davidson.

In the film, Scott is living at home with his mother in his mid-twenties. He has a strained relationship with his younger sister who is leaving for college and he is reluctant to commit to the childhood friend he is having a sexual relationship with. He aspires to become a tattoo artist but lacks the technical skill and direction to do so. After Scott makes an ethically egregious decision that results in his mother starting a new relationship, Scott discovers that his mother's new boyfriend is a firefighter, like his deceased father was. He then derails into a pattern of destructive behavior and must make peace with the loss of his father and issues he faces to mend his relationships with those around him. The film was filmed in 2019 and released digitally in July of 2020 during the Covid pandemic.

1 Elver, Hilal. "Racializing Islam before and after 9/11: From Melting Pot to Islamophobia.(I. Point of Departure through IV. 10 Years After 9/11: Islamophobia and Racializing Islam, with Footnotes, P. 119-155)(Ten Years After 9/11: Rethinking Counterterrorism)." *Transnational law & contemporary problems : a journal of the University of Iowa College of Law.*, no. 1.

2 *The King of Staten Island*, directed by Judd Apatow (2020; Universal City, California: Universal Studios, 2020. Digital.)

THE MODEL MILLENNIAL ANGST KING

When examining how Scott's character serves as a stand in for millennials, one must first explore the context of his presentation. He is being introduced as an alternative version of Pete Davidson, most of the audience knows that going into the film. When it comes to a public Millennial figure, Pete is a model example of the generation. Davidson's firefighter father died on 9/11. While the generation felt the need to come to terms with a national trauma without the maturity to do so, Davidson was confronted with that as a personal need. He explores the loss of his father in his comedy but none of this early humor feels reflective, aware of what was lost but lingering only its consequences. King of Staten Island removes 9/11 from the equation, the protagonist's father dies saving people from a local fire. Yet, many old enough in the audience are as aware of Davidson's background as they are aware of how they processed the event, how close to it they were and how much the consequences of the event have affected them.

The nature of the Scott as a general stand in for Pete Davidson, less specific and thus more relatable, is effective in many ways. Davidson publicly sought out help for emotional issues, announcing his diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder. He suffered from a very public mental breakdown after his break up with pop singer Ariana Grande. But here again, the specific can be boiled down to the general through Scott as a character. He filters out the extraneous specifics of famous pop star catalyst to get to the heart of the matter: emotional disturbance rooted in unresolved issues. The nature of Davidson's mental health struggles aren't inherently Millennial in nature but the visibility of them and his openness of exploring them are. Millennials have led a drive to remove stigmatic language and thought around mental health as a topic, more accepting of the realities of the frequencies of mental disorders and the need for mental healthcare³.

There's also the nature of Davidson's youth as a stand in for Millennials. Although Davidson is a seasoned stand up comic, starting at a young age, he rose to recognition as "SNL's resident young person". Davidson has consistently professionally traded in his youth, pressing his relative young age for comedic effect. It is fitting as Millennials seem to be eternally young. While the oldest millennials are approaching middle age, they are still seen with some sense of youth and the attitudes that come with that view. Even in that dissonance of reality versus perception, Davidson is a model Millennial. Millennials are seen as having lower job loyalty, ambition, and sense of responsibility- perceptions that are unearned. Millennials are more educated than prior generations⁴ and more likely to stay with an employer than Gen X⁵. Similarly Davidson is construed as a slacker but in reality has consistently worked diligently in comedy for

3 Marie, Jenny "Millennials And Mental Health | NAMI: National Alliance On Mental Illness ". 2020. National Alliance on Mental Illness.

<https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/February-2019/Millennials-and-Mental-Health>.

4 Bialik, Kristen & Fry, Richard. "How Millennials Compare With Prior Generations". 2020. *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*.

<https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/essay/millennial-life-how-young-adulthood-today-compares-with-prior-generations/>.

5 Fry, Richard. "Millennials Aren't Job-hopping Any Faster Than Gen Xers Did". 2017. Pew Research Center.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/19/millennials-arent-job-hopping-any-faster-than-generation-x-did/>.

a decade⁶, earning the respect of his contemporaries. Davidson also famously lives with his mother, fitting into the multi-generational living trend that Millennials jumpstarted⁷.

The Ethos of Davidson's Millennial Stand In

The establishment of Scott as a stand in for Pete Davidson is reinforced by the participation of Davidson as a figure. Davidson plays the character and co-wrote the film. His friends and fellow stand up comedians are featured in the film (Ricky Velez, Carly Aquilino, Derek Gaines). This presentation provides an authenticity to the experiences of Scott's loss. We trust that Scott's actions are credible, realistic, reactions because he is framed as a stand-in for Davidson while simultaneously being played by Pete Davidson. We never have to suspend our belief or doubt that we're seeing something that we might see if he were really in this situation. This is helped by well acted performances by the cast, few lacking moments in that regard.

However, when considering Scott's status as Millennial stand in, it is not Scott's basis in Davidson as a character that provides ethos but who Davidson actually is. From his stints on MTV shows as a commentator, to Wild and Out, and on to his giggly half hearted but charming roles in SNL skits, Davidson exudes the youth and non-committal attitude Millennials are known for. His humor is laced with the language of his generation, his openness about Crohn's disease or feelings regarding other figures in media is one fostered by growing up with the instant megaphone of expression that social media is, Millennials growing as social networking sites did. These factors lend Davidson's Scott not only ethos when portraying the struggles of an individual mourning but also when displaying the mindset of the Millennial in general.

APATOW'S LENS ON PETEY'S MILLENNIAL

So if Pete is the stand in for Millennials, what does Apatow do with that stand in? It's not admittedly his primary concern, as the individual seems to come first, processing Davidson's struggles with resentment, grief and confidence all seem to be at the forefront of the director's mind. However, the general representative quality of Scott as a young person with arrested development, living in his mother's house and dealing with mental health issues is present and Apatow cultivates it with artistic choices. Omitting the specific details of Pete Davidson's life, building the film around a fictional occurrence of his mother beginning to date so as to magnify and explore his attitudes about loss and his experience of grief impersonally are excellent choices that push past Pete Davidson's personal identity and into the audience's collective one, giving them someone to relate to, despite his numerous flaws.

⁶ Pete Davidson, interview by Charlamagne the God, *Live Your Truth: An Honest Conversation with Charlamagne The God and Pete Davidson*, Youtube.com, 24 February, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJbqiHbusKY>

⁷ D'Vera Cohn and Jeffrey S. Passel. "Record 64 Million Americans Live In Multigenerational Households". 2018. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/05/a-record-64-million-americans-live-in-multigenerational-households/>.

The Marriage of Ethos & Pathos to Form Logos in Apatow's Presentation of Pete

Apatow doesn't pull out specific diagnoses or cures, doesn't put his finger on the fact that Scott is dealing with mental health issues at all. Instead he displays them for what they are, having faith that the audience can recognize Scott's devolution into destructive behavior for what it is, a pure sense of struggle. Apatow lays out logical breadcrumbs to build a case for how Scott's grief has manifested into mental instability. He presents manic outbursts, gaslighting, threats to harm himself and irresponsible decisions with a steady pacing that comes with not only his level of experience but the marks of another time. He fights the point and click nature of the Millennial preference in media, the immediate payoffs that seem to cause the modern thriller to resist drawing out a twist throughout the film and instead opt for more reveals at a faster pace. This is offered in contrast to Scott being referred to as "a man of his word", his diligence when applying himself to working in the firehouse after being displaced, and his social adeptness that allows him to connect with a virtual stranger: his mother's boyfriend's ex-wife (and if you're getting Springer vibes here, you aren't the only one). Apatow lays Scott's traits out over time with patience, so that we are provided with all the evidence that we need to make the conclusions he wants us to make. The sum of this presentation becomes a Millennial that is capable but damaged, not purposefully complacent but thwarted by circumstance.

In *The King of Staten Island*, Apatow's logos are dependent on characterization and Scott's substitute status, whether serving as Pete Davidson himself or as the general Millennial dealing with some of many generational struggles. The film's logos consists of the ethos of Scott's role as that substitute, providing authority to the portrayal of the character, and pathos, sharing the emotional turmoil of Scott's experiences revisiting the environment his deceased father worked in or the strained relationships that loss formed within his family. The evidence presented to provide us with the consequences of Scott's grief depend on Davidson's substitution as Scott. the real life suffering of the individual that we know we're seeing reenacted from the film's first scene onward, the movie beginning with behavior from Scott that Davidson has admitted to doing in real life. The film opens with Scott closing his eyes on the road in what is presented as a sort of pseudo suicide attempt. This is the first note of the narrative and it resonates through his flaky indecisiveness towards his childhood friend, his banter with his 'homies', his verbal scuffles with his sister and his mother's boyfriend. We remember that Scott has the capacity to close his eyes on the road and never open them again. It brings weight to all of his decisions afterward, the emotional weight of his state of mind providing pathos to the audience.

Gen X-er Directs Millennial Masterpieces By Shaking His Cane

Apatow frames his work in a way suitable to a more Millennial minded landscape (and arguably always has), his anecdotal style of framing scenes adding up to a sentimental whole has resounded with Millennials throughout their lives from adolescence to adulthood. The format is slightly reminiscent of web series, sketch shows, and even social media accounts; a progressive development of character through chunks of jokes, chunks of sentimental dialogue, where sometimes arguably flow and pacing suffers. This is when *King of Staten Island*'s on brand but

indulgently long run time will be mentioned. Still, as Apatow has noted, in a world of binge watching and Marvel movies, this run time wouldn't necessarily deter the average millennial.

The one place where Apatow falters in addressing his audience and the population his star represents is his Gen X conclusion. But of course, Scott should be expected to leave his mother's house. Being emotionally stable, employed and working towards a future is not nearly as important as the formal step of adulthood, leaving the home. At least for Apatow, this drive to move the character from home doesn't mirror reality, the life of the average young adult at all. Even Davidson's own life, moving out of his mother's house at twenty, is superseded by his choice to move in with her again in his mid-twenties, forming a string of jokes throughout his career around the multi-generational home that he lives in.

Apatow also can not resist the phrasing of this story as a coming of age story. While it adds depth to the story to form Scott into a Millennial stand in, if the audience does so, it immediately further infantilizes a generation who undeservedly already has been.

A Gen X Rejection of A Millennial Product

Apatow doesn't seek out more weight than the surface provides. His relationship with his mother is tested by his behavior but to what extent, you don't know. The loss of his father has cost him in experiences but you're not sure how that event got him to where he is now. His friends are a negative influence but what becomes of those relationships and to what extent is their friendship true, you're never told. In a negative review from New York Times⁸, Wesley Morris writes, "But at this length, 'Staten Island' should be a meatier Oedipal comedy — about Scott and Margie's grief, stagnation and codependency; about Claire's resentment of their bond — the kind of funny movie that's a raw moment away from the tragedy just below its surface."

Morris goes on to compare King of Staten Island to Funny People saying it lacks its depth. But what Gen X-er Morris might consider is that Funny People is what King of Staten Island would look like ten years ago, what its audience, Gen X, would want from its generational stand in, Adam Sandler. Millennials, who financially needed to live with their parents longer than anyone else, lived through war, financial depression, the rise of internet and social media and a societal change that they're parents could not prepare them for, don't need a comedy that comes with an Oedipal complex. Don't need the heavy lifting done for them. They saw the suicide attempt in the beginning, the hopeful glance to the sky at the end. They get it.

As stated before, Apatow himself is no flawless voice of a generation not his own. Apatow still sees the issues at hand through the eyes of the Gen X, pro-awkward masculinity, auteur he's known to be. In the end, Bill Burr's tough love boyfriend of Scott's mom is right and nasally half heartedly deflects past wrongs and his failed marriage, leaving them unexamined. Scott's lack of achievement, true achievement of any of the objectives given to him in the film (find a place,

⁸ Wesley Morris. "'The King Of Staten Island' Review: Pete Davidson Gets (Even More) Personal". June 11, 2020. *Nytimes.Com*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/11/movies/the-king-of-staten-island-review.html>.

keep a job, progress as a tattoo artist) leaves him failing up, with a girlfriend and family's respect.

Or does it? He does not necessarily fail or succeed in progress in personal standing but intrinsic growth. When fully detailed his relationships are earned. The ambiguity of where he will end up, how things will be with his sister, his friends, these things suit the times. If Scott is a stand in for Millennials, we shouldn't know how things end for him. In a time of social disruption at the height it is, climate change, financial instability and increasing student loan debt, how could we simply give Millennials a pretty bow on their ending? It is much more fitting to end the story on a note of hope, to be less concerned with filling in holes for completion, and more concerned with giving an emotionally consistent journey of surviving emotional trauma.

CONCLUSION

Considering its release date, the film's themes of grief, loss and heroism were pertinent to the times. King of Staten Island debuted during a covid epidemic that has to date killed over 190,000 people⁹. The film's appreciation for firefighters can resonate with our current celebration for essential workers. In the film, Scott has a heart to heart with his mother that resonates, echoing the pathos of this film. He reluctantly says "I'll try and get it together. It's just hard. I think it'll always be hard." The line sums up not only the struggles that the character has felt but Davidson's, as well as the whole generation of people who have met crises after crises in their youth in a society changing so rapidly, prior generations are less equipped to guide us as others have before. It is an excellent summary of the struggles that not only Millennials have faced, but will face in the future. But more importantly, the line shows a resolve to journey through adversity and the film as a whole shows the importance for us as individuals and together, a society, to hold on to that resolve.

⁹ "U.S. Coronavirus Cases and State Maps: Tracking Cases, Deaths". September 15, 2020. *The Washington Post*.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/coronavirus-us-cases-deaths/>