

Abstract: Existential Theo-Patricide: *Garden State*'s Ironic Quest for Affiliation

Jared Griffin, TCU

I argue that Zach Braff's partially autobiographical film *Garden State* can be seen as a blended account of Old Testament and existential narrative that criticizes the role of 'god' as father in an empirical attempt at personal meaning-definition. Through these motifs, Braff examines the transition from the legalistic and unemotional order of Andrew Largeman's father-god to the romantic freedom of individuality Largeman discovers in his muse, Sam, and in his otherworld Virgil, Mark, as what Said labels the insurrection of filiation to a hierarchy of affiliation. Braff transplants existential narrative to modern New Jersey (the anti-Edenic "Garden State") by using Old Testament/Jewish motifs (e.g. Eden, Noah's Ark, diaspora, the Wailing Wall) and other insightful scenes that establish Largeman's father as a god metaphor, an upper class being who powerfully consecrates meaning for those "below" him, and sets up Sam and Mark as belonging to affiliative structures that usurp/dupe filial dogma. In order to accomplish this shift, however, Largeman destroys, ideologically of course, his father as god (existential theopatricide), though this transformation is somewhat ironic due to Braff's own involvement in the film – as writer, actor, auteur. For, in filming this, Braff metaphysically assumes the same consecrating/objectifying power of the filmic process that his character seeks to deny in his father-god, subjectively criticizing hierarchy with an existential anti-hierarchy on-screen by creating a univocal dogma of his own off-screen, a problem for any demythologizing (Barthes), and one that has not been resolved, though it tries, in *Garden State*.