Abstract: Existential Theo-Patricide: Garden State’s Ironic Quest for Affiliation
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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 theo-patricide), 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 de-mythologizing (Barthes), and one that has not been resolved, though it tries, in Garden State.