

Scott Morris
Statement of Purpose
December 22, 2006

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for taking the time to consider my application. After reviewing the many good PhD programs in literature studies, I cannot deny the preeminence that Vanderbilt's PhD program in English Literature holds in my mind. Through recent readings and because Vanderbilt has a fascinating combination of American Studies and fascist scholarship, I hope to come to your English Department to continue my work on fascist aesthetics in post-World War II literature.

My interest in fascism as it relates to Vanderbilt began in part through some of my recent readings. I contacted Professor Dana Nelson a few weeks ago about her recent work on fascism and she pointed me to her work on *The South Atlantic Quarterly* and her piece in *Materializing Democracy*. Her exploration of "ugly" democracy in the latter collection parallels some of the work that I have done recently on Theodor Adorno. Certainly her pointing to aesthetics reflects a growing theme among current literary and theoretical writing, but on the other hand her questions on relationship between fascism and how the dominating effects of beauty act like totalitarian political systems points to an area in need of more scholarship. Her work is fascinating to me because it mirrors my exploration not only of the increasing relevancy of fascism in current political discussions but also its surprising absence from literary aesthetic theory.

Most of my work over the past year has revolved around the question of "How might fascism's aesthetics inform the way that we look at the literature of post-World War II America?" The literature from this time screams a dissentious aesthetic that has been interpreted through the many cultural theoretical modes of post-structuralism as the margin speaking back. Yet, as in the case of Alice Walker, much writing after the war consciously, and sometimes unconsciously, explores fascistic aesthetics of Nazism and Italian *Facismo*. Studying literature after World War II with the intent of searching for fascistic aesthetics promises not only to elucidate our understanding of historical fascism but also to question the varied forms of fascism in American culture. Much of my research text has come from the Frankfurt School theoreticians, most importantly Theodor Adorno, whose *Aesthetic Theory* explores the totalitarian effects of beauty. My latest work questions how the critical element of the "ugly" in art acts metaphorically similar to the role dissent plays in politics.

My interest in aesthetics and fascism is not confined to research alone, however. As the editor of BYU's student journal *Americana*, I saw many fine topics relating to fascism. As scores of papers passed over my desk, I realized that many of their topics dealt with the impact of World War II on current American culture. Each of these papers attempted to define what the experiences of their grandparent's meant to their academic lives. Yet after taking a course entitled "The History of Fascism" I began to see the connection between the aesthetics of fascism and the *Americana* submissions: much student writing avoids connections between American culture and European fascism. I continue to see this in some of my first-year writing students who often define American politics in religious terms that are uncritical of the system that doesn't always look out for their interests. Because of fascism's influence, much of my teaching as an instructor at BYU is geared towards asking students to think critically about their political world.

The faculty at Vanderbilt's English Department have specific research interests that I wish to collaborate with. Certainly Professor Nelson's recent work on ugly democracies promises to illuminate my exploration of fascist aesthetics, but her broader interests in American Studies issues, such as the relationship between culture and politics, will give contextual life to my work on post-war writing. And in the context of post-war scholarship, I hope to utilize Dean Masullo's Cold War literature expertise, Robert Barsky's dissentious work on Comsky, and Vera Kutzinski's American Studies specialty to give more framing to my work.

After doctoral work, I plan to continue exploring theory and literature at the collegiate level. I am determined to help university students explore their role in the investigation of aesthetic and political questions: how does literature challenge or support their role in the community, how might aesthetics illuminate their participation in the democratic process, and even how might "ugly" aspects of their own characters actually drive them towards balancing their world.

Thank you again for the time that you have invested in considering my application. I look forward to working with you at Vanderbilt. Please feel free to call or email me if you would like any further information about my professional or educational background.

Best Regards,
Scott Morris