



Swing Kids: Analysis in Persuasion

“Swing Kids” implements an effective symbolic mode to express the appeal/horror of Nazism, with the seemingly light artifact of dance. Here, however, dance is a symbol of freedom, of personal expression, of the subversiveness of youth to authority, and of appreciating the wild in the world, and the wild in the self. The dance is sensual, athletic, sexy, playful, original, and unique. Everything the Nazi movement is not. The Swing Kids enjoy communicating in another language that is an extension of the dance experience, is exclusive to those that appreciate the music, and of their own creation. There is order and cooperation, but plenty of room for solo expression in the loose framework. Both Swing and Nazi may be seen as types of clubs, even as they espouse antithetical beliefs, and occupy opposite ends of a spectrum. Both implement an insider exclusivity, a certain costume, or uniform, respectively, and a shared understanding with a sense of belonging. Certain cognitive dissonance ensues for those that attempt to be in both clubs.

From Cialdini, “Commitment and Consistency” (p 53) “Once we make a choice or take a stand, we will encounter personal and interpersonal pressure to behave consistently with that commitment. Those pressures will cause us to respond in ways that justify our earlier decision. We simply convince ourselves that we have made the right choice, and no doubt, feel better about our earlier decision.”

This statement is a good measure of the character arc in each boy. At no time does Arvid give in to persuasive appeals of Nazi thought or action. Arvid finds his place in the world of swing music. Although he cannot dance, he belongs through listening, collecting, and his encyclopedic knowledge of swing music and musicians. As a lame boy with glasses, he is not invited to join the Nazi movement, with its nationalism, its emphasis on physical superiority, rigid rules and conforming. Arvid is consistent and content with his choice. He is not tempted, nor has need to resist, and therefore, does not alter his beliefs. Ultimately, Arvid recognizes the fatal insidiousness of the Nazi movement, and sees how it has successfully captured and brain washed his friend, Thomas. His deliberate, tragic choice, to kill himself, comes from his clarity of

the Nazi movement, which he has consistently had all along, and which has reached its natural conclusion. "We are coming for you next" Thomas yells at him in the street, and Arvid knows this is true, and that he has truly lost his friend. Arvid was always an outsider looking in. As a character arc, Arvid occupies the central axis; he does not change. Through Arvid's eyes, this film illustrates persuasion as a process rather than as a one-time event. We see how incremental and progressive is the process that the Nazis employ. Arvid yells, "We are murdering!" when he refuses to play "just one good German song." He says, "anytime you go along, you make it easier for them." Arvid refuses to collude, refuses to slide into any kind of tacit approval. He sees that every concession is collusion. The country and its behaviors create the dissonance, and for Arvid, it is irreconcilable.

Thomas and Peter will end up on opposed ends of the spectrum. Both have father issues. The main difference in their character is that Peter asks questions, until he gets answers. From ELM reading, p 156: "Thus, a person who processes a persuasive message via the central route is likely to evaluate and think critically about the arguments contained in the message." Peter uses central processing. He ironically gets this precise advice from the Nazi, Herr Knopf, to "know what you are getting into before you agree to do it." He says this as he requests Peter to inform on the bookseller that Peter delivers for. This very advice is what Peter indeed implements, hence discovering that he is delivering false birth certificates for the bookseller, and the ashes of the murdered, for the Nazis.

Thomas, on the other hand, is a character that says "Just go along, make the best of things." He literally squeezes his eyes shut, and presses his palms to his head, willfully keeping his mind away from centrally processing any messages that may challenge his cavalier peripheral thinking. From ELM reading, p 158, "whereas attitudes changed through the central route are based on thoughtful evaluation of the arguments, attitudes changed through the peripheral route are often not based on any evaluation of the arguments but instead are based on heuristics or "rules of thumb." Thomas wants to have it easy, uses shortcut reasoning, for example, to be an "HJ by day, and a Swing Boy by night." He makes no effort to evaluate the reality of embracing the two impossibly antithetical philosophies.

From P 100, Harmon-Jones: "Difficult decisions arouse more dissonance than do easy decisions because there is a greater proportion of dissonant cognitions after a difficult decision than after an easy one." For Peter, every step in cooperating with the Nazis is a difficult decision and for Thomas, just the opposite. For Peter, "the presence of a cognitive inconsistency of sufficient magnitude will evoke an aversive motivational state dissonance that drives cognitive work aimed at reducing the cognitive inconsistency." (Harmon-Jones, p 100). We see this throughout Peter's continued growth of character, as he cannot reconcile the fatherly (if also unctuous), interest of Herr Knopf with the brutality of the Nazi truths that he represents, and that are emerging. Herr Knopf is filled with hypocrisy, and Peter exposes this by spouting the very dogma that Herr Knopf saw to it that Peter would learn. We see this culminate in the dinner scene. Knopf's gifts of foreign foods, foreign music, (through likely a stolen radio), and wine drinking. All are condemned by Peter, using direct quotes from his HJ training.

Peter is the strongest critical thinker, as he must dig deep to overcome his grief at the loss of his father, and the challenges of his mother, who instructs him not to succumb to his feelings, and to steel himself, while she also disrespects his father's choice to resist the Nazis, causing Peter to doubt his father's heroism and family commitment, as well as his love. If he would only align himself with the Nazis, everything would be easier. There is food and vacations, and belonging and ease. There is the power of the winner, of the propaganda messaging, and its insistence on the righteousness of the Nazi calling. Peter does not take the bait of any of these persuasive appeals. He questions. He struggles. He is yet a dutiful son, taking responsibility for his bad behavior of stealing the radio, and doing what he must to pay for his actions, by joining the HJ. Even as he would like to have the ease of the peripheral decision making of his friend Thomas, who joined the HJ willingly to be with Peter, he cannot but help looking deeper, and questioning.

Thomas, on the other hand, is the weakest critical thinker, and can be seen viewing inoculation films, complete with Jewish people compared to rats sprawling from a sewer, placidly taking this in. He also seems to respond to the call of another propaganda film to be seen as "special." This swelling pride is in direct reaction to his father belittling him, and the Nazi movement, that Thomas is part of. Now he has the "Fatherland" and he can replace the need for his actual father, which he does, by reporting his father's private conversations against Hitler as a "madman" to his superiors at HJ.

If Thomas had been told early on, that he would betray his own father, (likely to death), he surely would have vehemently denied this possibility. But, as a step by step process, through continued commitment and consistency, Thomas whirrs along, finally and fully, arriving there. (Cialdini). Thomas had protective instincts in the beginning, as we saw when he beat a group of Nazis that were beating a single boy. Later, we see him viewing the film that pronounces that "Hitler protects and liberates the German race, regardless of borders." He can convince himself that he made the right choice, and feel better about himself. Thomas goes from the long haired, freedom loving boy that dances all night, saying "Swing Hiel" and mocking Nazism, to the cropped cut, uniformed, true believer that says "Zeig Hiel, with true belief.

Peter finds himself by finding his total intolerance for brutality and hypocrisy, ultimately refusing any collusion with the Nazis. This is the gift of Arvid. Peter finds his love and respect for his father through learning of his father's love and appreciation of Peter's curiosity, and promptly gifts his younger brother with this paternal knowledge. Peter also receives from the letter of his father, the validity of his own inherent drive to be fully responsible. Not just for himself or his family, but as a citizen. His father speaks of being responsible for "what is happening in this country, and not colluding with evil."

Peter dances his last swing dance, alone, and not without agony, then allows himself to be taken away by the Nazis. In the final moments, the depth of Peter's integrity lights the fading embers in Thomas, now a full, unapologetic Nazi. Thomas urges Peter to run away from work camps or death, but Peter does not seek escape. Much like his father, Peter has sacrificed his life to preserve his integrity. In doing so, he successfully reconciles his cognitive dissonance.