

Anthony Alexander walked into Cafe Discursive a few seconds before eleven o'clock in the morning. He sat down at his usual booth and placed his usual order.

There was a new waiter this morning so Anthony was required to prove his vaccination status. He had remembered to bring his phone with him...not that anybody was likely to be calling. He sipped from his glass of water and pitched his ears toward the customers in the booth ahead of his. He was disappointed that their conversation was about Spotify and Neil Young. Anthony thought that old rock stars pulling their works from Spotify because of the streaming service's alliance with a comedian host who sucked up to rightist anti-vaxxers was a non-issue, until some musicians perhaps under twenty-five began pulling their work from the service.

Neil Young, Joni Mitchell,, whatever. Too California for his taste.

So Anthony was grateful that the music on the PA was drowning out the customers' conversation in the booth in front of his. The music was not unpleasant. It seemed like something other than alternative or alt-country.

Cafe Discursive was a slacker hangout. The staff were very laid back....no sales pressure or frustrated actors. Servers came and went at a rapid rate, probably because the wages and tips were terrible. But the cafe was a comfort zone, and Anthony liked his comfort zones and comfort food.

Perhaps there might be some more intellectual customers tomorrow? He finished his breakfast and decided to forego tea for the time being.

Anthony was hungry and did not feel like being in his kitchen so he bundled up and trekked over to the cafe.

He ordered pancakes and fruit salad with home fries. The home fries were actually crisp and the fruit salad passable. No rancid pineapple today.

He recognized two senior artists in the booth in front of his. This was a woman and a man who the staff considered to be a couple. But when overhearing their conversation one morning Anthony picked up that the man was gay. He was not sure one way or the other about the woman.

He realized he had never overheard these two people addressing one another by name. They probably had generic boomer names like Steve and Karen. Anthony laughed as 'Karening' by now was likely an OED approved word.

Often the man and the woman engaged in meaningless gossip but today they were quite animated about the Truckers Convoy in Ottawa.

Well, this is serious camping.

What exactly do we mean by that?

Bonfires, cooking, pets, dancing.

Not live music surely?

Oh I'm sure there are probably hootenannies. It's like sixties counterculture has been appropriated by anarchic-capitalism or something.

Ha ha. Boomer counterculture already was anarcho-capitalism. I mean, what could be more of a celebratory brand name than The Grateful Dead? What on earth might be the point of music with all those fucking honking trucks?

All to true, all too true.

The Occupy Ottawa convoy is generally younger. There's a disconnected rave element here.

Probably with the wrong drugs.

Probably. What a waste of good drugs.....freezing convoys in February.

Anthony's order came to his table and he requested more water from the server.

There's always been an overlap between anti-vaxxers and new age alternative medicine types. This is hardly new

Or news. The anti-vaxxers and the new age alt-medicine types are all for the individual. It's all too Ayn Rand for me, I'm afraid.

Yes. Ayn Rand can be blamed for many atrocities. Anti-vaxxers, Rush, so many more

And the media is all aghast that it's now the right associating themselves with 'freedom' and consequently the left with authoritarianism.

Well, this is hardly a new development. Free speech. Free market. Freedom from government et cetera.

And then Young Trudeau invokes the Emergency Act in an echo of Old Trudeau and the War Measures Act.

The latter lets the military get out of control, But does the former? I'm not optimistic. I'm not optimistic at all.

The server turned up the music on the House PA before delivering Anthony's water. Anthony was wondering where his table neighbours might go after deconstructing or reconfiguring the emergency and war measures acts. But he didn't feel that he could ask a minimum-waged waiter to turn down the volume. Anthony himself had barely survived the service industry.

He finished his brunch and decided not to order tea. He registered the man and woman at the table in front of his trying to converse over the generic music...probably Smashing Pumpkins or Screaming Trees or one of those generic nineties bands. He had noticed on social media that the singer for Screaming Trees had died the other day.

He was going to go home and have a nap as his sleep the previous night had been erratic. This was happening more and more frequently.

He wondered if the man and woman from the cafe were intending to perhaps take in a few art exhibitions but then he remembered that this day was a Tuesday.

Anthony could not use his own kitchen this morning because it was being used for a music video shoot. Such inconveniences were good for the bank account and therefore necessary.

So he decided to go to the cafe....the neighbourhood really didn't offer any other cheap choices. A server he didn't recognize took his order and Anthony had to make it clear that there could not be any butter on his pancakes. At first the new server thought Anthony's request was daft but then realized that such a request was possible and probably had been performed by the kitchen staff on many previous occasions.

Anthony wanted to say "Batter, not butter you fucking idiot" but he bit his tongue.

And there were two late twenty-ish girls sitting in the booth opposite his. They were talking about relationships. One girl was at the end of her rope with her boyfriend who had apparently retreated completely into his self and simply was no longer very good company.

Well Scott has never really been in a relationship before this one.

I can tell. A word of advice.....he doesn't look after himself because he doesn't love himself. And if he can't love himself, then he can't imagine how somebody might love him.

Anthony decided that these two girls' love lives weren't really worth being privy to. He didn't mind at all when the new waiter turned up the volume on the playlist, even though there were as per usual too many twangy guitars.

The pancakes had arrived and the cooks or the server himself had misinterpreted his request for no butter. Anthony flagged the waiter and complained. The waiter apologized and promised to bring fresh pancakes with no butter. Anthony had never been able to tolerate butter nor eggs nor cheese nor many other foods. He could eliminate the stench of eggs from pancakes by over-pouring the maple syrup.

He heard the girls at the next table discussing self-respect in relation to egocentricity and even narcissism. It seemed that both girls had decided to break up with their ineffective and probably very dull boyfriends.

Good, Anthony thought. Good.

Anthony had taken a chance by not bringing his umbrella with him. March was supposed to come in like a wet lion on this day. Which meant perhaps that it would go our like a snowy tiger in another thirty days?

He found one of his usual booths and one of the usual staff was working. Anthony was pleased that he would not have to explain no butter on the fucking pancakes. Yes they were cooked in batter which was sort of a butter but that was all on the inside and never on the outside.

He recognized the voice of Karen Carpenter on the Playlist. The song was *Close to You* which was and is a good song. The Carpenters had done quite nicely for themselves with good songs by the likes of Burt Bacharach and Leon Russell among others.

Three plus decades ago it had become very ironic to like The Carpenters, all in tandem with Todd Haynes' movie *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*. The movie began with a

dramatization involving actual actors and then a 'simulation' involving Barbie Dolls. Anthony thought the movie had been utterly brilliant.

He thought the Carpenters' endurance was not at all about so straight that they're not or any other form of irony. He thought their endurance was all due to Karen's singing voice. It was the most comfortable of voices...the most welcoming. Of course she had other voices that were barely suppressed until they weren't.

The Carpenters yielded to some instrumental music...not classical but possibly film soundtrack treacle. Two probably gay college-aged men were sitting at the adjacent table.

More Carpenters. Please.

Yes. My comfort zone, please.

Except for Superstar. That one really is melodramatic.

You're thinking of the Sonic Youth cover, dear.

Don't you remember our karaoke night last October?

Oh right. You sang Superstar in the approximated voice of David Bowie. Not one of your greatest moments, I'm afraid.

The server brought the pancakes. Anthony as usual requested another glass of water. He tried not to be too excessive with the maple syrup but did not succeed. He signaled to the server for additional napkins.

I remember seeing the Barbie Doll movie at TIFF in 1988

So do I. I remember the Q&A after the movie.

Oh Jesus. There were these earnest student types who thought Haynes was making fun of anorexics.

He wasn't doing so at all. I remember the filmmaker telling the audience that the deeper he got into making the movie the more he found himself emphasizing with Karen.

At which point someone yelled out how could anybody possibly emphasize with a Barbie Doll.

Right. Probably some literal-minded theatre dullard.

Now some generic alt-rock took over The Playlist. Somebody trying to be Nirvana but not succeeding. Anthony had once seen a documentary about Kurt Cobain and found himself really liking the man but he had never warmed to the music.

His neighbours also seemed displeased that they could no longer hear each other talking. They finished their coffees and paid up. They settled their bill and then left the cafe, walking past Anthony. Anthony wished that he had known these two men..perhaps they might meet again some sunny or soggy day. In the same place, of course.

Anthony settled into one of his usual booths and noticed that there was a new server. Well, they do come and go, he muttered to himself. Shitty wages and minimal tips...that would do it.

There was a man and a woman sitting adjacent to him. The man seemed older than the woman. Was this an older brother younger sister dynamic? A teaching assistant and his student?

Well, the Prime Minister of Ukraine is becoming a war hero. It's interesting that he used to be an actor.

That's a tradition, isn't it Emily?

What do you mean, Greg?

Let's see. Ronald Reagan...

Reagan wasn't American President during any major war.

That's debatable. Iran. Nicaragua.....there are always other wars that never really make the papers.

Let alone The Internet and Social Media.

Exactly.

Anthony saw the new server taking orders from Emily and Greg. The pair of them continued their conversation after the waiter moved over to Anthony's table.

Pancakes no butter. It is exactly what it sounds like, thank you.

The waiter shook his head and walked toward the kitchen. Surely the cook would nod and explain the Man With No Butter to the new recruit.

The thing is, Emily. There are always wars and military endeavors that don't get reported in the mainstream western media.

I don't disagree, Greg. But...

There's Saudi Arabia and Yemen. There's Israel and Palestine. There are many others if we care to investigate.

But the current Russian invasion of Ukraine cannot be trivialized.

Nobody's doing that, Emily. Except... now it seems to be illegal to point out that Russia is not the only big bad imperialist in the world. That Vladimir Putin is hardly the only terrible dictator bullying other countries. Et cetera.

Putin is a megalomaniac attempting to revive the Soviet Union as it was prior to 1989. He'll bludgeon Ukraine and then Latvia and then...

And here was have The West as the only plausible alternative to the evil dictator all over again..

Hah. You might remember, Greg, how the previous American president hero worshipped Putin.

Oh for fuck sake. Stupid old Donald Trump loves his strongmen. How predictable. There are people who mistake America First ...or isolationism..for pacifism, true enough. But Biden and the Democrats are warmongers true and through..

The server delivered the order to Emily and Greg's table and then told them to lower the decibels. They were bothering other customers.

Anthony could see a solitary woman at another table who looked displeased with the tone and volume of Greg and Emil's conversation. Anthony could also see that the new waiter appeared to be Ukrainian, or perhaps Latvian or Lithuanian.

This is a free society, at least it is officially.

Greg!

Emily's admonishment did have its desired effect of making Greg shut up. Free speech was never completely free. Yes, this cafe is a public space. And so on and so on.

The waiter returned with Anthony's order. Anthony asked for another glass of water. Emily and Greg ate silently and then began talking about some local artist.

Anthony tried not to listen. The local artist did not sound at all interesting.

On this rainy morning the cafe's staff were playing music not from their regular playlist. They were playing Samuel Barber's Adagio For Strings. This was one of Anthony's favourite compositions although it was of course hopelessly associated with the second world war and then all consequent wars.

At the adjacent table there were two men who Anthony quickly realized were theatre actors. He realized that they were en route to a rehearsal at an iconic theatre located just about a block away and then slightly north.

So it's almost the same cast as Howard's last production. I mean, here we are again. Well you must've noticed that he tends to use the same actors all the time.

For sure and for sure. And here we are again.

I might be too busy for Howard next year, if things work out.

Lucky you, Richard. Lucky you.

Look, Jeff. If you feel so negative about Howard then why did you sign on for this production?

Three guesses and the first three don't count.

Most actors took whatever they could get, which made them like other freelancers. Anthony realized that the two actors were discussing a man they called Howard but whom he recognized as John. Perhaps the director had changed his name? Perhaps John's middle name was Howard? Whatever.

The server delivered the pancakes and a pitcher of water. The two actors were both eating eggs over easy. Anthony could not of course eat eggs.

Howard's okay to work for, Jeff. He's not obtrusive.
But if you ask him a question he gives you the runaround. I've given up trying.
I guess I don't have any questions for Howard. What you get is what you get.
I disagree, Richard.

Barber's Adagio now gave way to Albinioni's Adagio in G minor. All these adagios. Anthony guessed this unusual playlist had to be war-related.

We agree to disagree. Mind you, I think Howard is a barely closeted militarist. He's like Oliver Stone...says he's anti-war but he's utterly dependent upon the continued existence of war. War is a given...it's unavoidable.

Yes, I agree here, Richard. You see, I think Howard's real subject isn't history..it's masculinity.

Do you think Howard is queer?

Oh no, not at all. I don't think he's interested in women which is not at all the same thing as being queer...in the homosexual sense of that adjective.

The parts of this play that ring true for me aren't about the buffoon politicians. I think of the scenes with the soldiers... all little deer in the headlights...all pawns for the incompetent politicians.

Agreed and agreed. I mean, what does Howard do when he's not directing or writing? Sports, man. He's a closeted jock.

Albinioni now gave way to Screaming Trees or Smashing Pumpkins or Pearl Jam or one of those bands. Anthony was tempted to request the Barber again. The two actors finished up and paid their tab. There would doubtlessly be coffee and pastries at the theatre.

Actors are strange, Anthony muttered to himself. They do have agency, but then only slightly.

The cafe was more crowded than usual so Anthony found himself seated near the back of the building. He found himself checking the twenty-four hour news updates and also the weather forecast.

The damn Ukrainian war was spiraling more and more out of control. Putin's troops may well have been tripping over themselves but they were killing thousands of Ukrainian civilians in the process.

Anthony was tempted to order a pint of beer but he checked himself. Too early in the day for any sort of alcoholic beverage.

Two boys were seated at an adjacent table. They are arguing about whether Jimmy Page played a Les Paul or a Telecaster on Stairway to Heaven. Anthony had always disliked Led Zeppelin and similar classic rock bands.

The boys' argument was going nowhere until a young woman joined their table. They stopped talking as she joined them.

Sorry I'm late, guys.

That's okay Shelley.
You're not all that late.
Thanks, guys. I'm afraid I have bad news....Kathleen Sullivan died.

The two music geeks swallowed their tongues. They did not seem to know Kathleen Sullivan as well as Shelley did.

I didn't know her that well, really.
I didn't know your friend Kathleen was sick. How did she die?
Cancer, Rob. She'd been ill for some time.

Anthony didn't know Kathleen Sullivan. Was she a musician? An artist? A writer?

Her partner died a few years ago. Right, Shelley?
Yes, Ben. Joe passed in 2017.

The waiter took Anthony's order. He saw an empty booth closer to the front of the cafe and asked if he could move to that booth. He didn't want to be listening to a conversation about the death of somebody he didn't know.

This woman who had died couldn't have been that old, he remarked to himself. This girl Shelley and her friends certainly weren't very old. Cancer.....Anthony associated various cancers with older people and older bodies. He had lost friends to cancer and was terrified about the possibility of getting it himself.

The server obliged his request. Anthony could now sit closer to the front of the cafe. The music on The Playlist sounded like Led Zeppelin but it was somebody else....somebody loud and insignificant.

Anthony decided to have dinner at the cafe and not at the local roti specialist. He decided to order a vegetable stir-fry with shrimp. A few vegetables never hurt, after all.

There was a birthday party at one of the long side tables. The party-goers appeared to all be in their mid-to-late twenties. The birthday girl was clearly a friend of one of the servers. Anthony knew the cafe encouraged birthday parties as the revelers did tend to drink and run up tabs. He didn't mind being at a front table without neighbours.

The Playlist surely didn't seem to be specific to the birthday party. Anthony placed his order which included a glass of the house red wine, which was tolerable. Anthony was pleased to hear two of his favourite Michael Jackson songs....Wanna Be Starting Something and then Billie Jean.

The kiiiiiiiiii-d is not my son!

No, the kid was most certainly not his son.

Anthony thought of his friend Jessica who refused to listen to Michael Jackson. The singer had of course been accused of being a paedophile who may or may have not paid off the admittedly

serious charges. Jessica was generally good company but Anthony disagreed with her not only on the subject of Michael Jackson but with other musicians and artists.

Did she also boycott Morrissey? What about Ted Nugent? What about Mel Gibson movies? Anthony could support boycotting artists only if the said artists were financial contributors to reprehensible endeavors or projects. If Morrissey actually financed Nigel Farage, then bye bye Steven. And so on and so forth.

Michael Jackson songs ceded to some more alt-rock. Pearl Jam trying to be Led Zeppelin or something similarly terrible.

Anthony's food arrived and it was good. He had specified no onions no broccoli and no cauliflower and the server and cook had obliged. After eating he sipped his wine and stared out the window. People were still wearing their masks even when outside.

The man who neighbouring actors had referred to as Howard but who Anthony remembered as John entered the cafe and sat at a table by himself. Howard ordered a hamburger with no toppings whatsoever. Howard was a man of few words and no affectations. Anthony wondered if he tipped.

He finished his glass of wine and then asked for the bill. Outside it had begun to snow and Anthony was not wearing winter boots.

On an unusually windy morning Anthony decided he had to eat at the cafe as fire alarms were being tested throughout his building. He wouldn't be able to read or answer emails or listen to music, so out he went.

He recognized the couple who may not have been a couple at the adjacent booth. He remembered them being loquacious so he tilted his ear.

So..I tuned into your friend Scott's mini-lecture about people who don't like art.

Oh? And?

Well it was straightforward enough. Scott used to of course work at a public gallery in a university so there would always be people coming in then taking one look and leaving with a snort of derision.

Or with some words. Strong words.

Oh yes. Like *what is this shit?*

But these people enter the gallery, so presumably they have a hope that there might be something they consider to be good art. Or why would they even look let alone walk into the gallery?

Killing time, perhaps. Something useless like art is nevertheless useful for killing time.

No.....

The server took Anthony's order. This was another fresh server to whom he had to explain no butter on the pancakes. The server look startled then realized that this customer was a regular and would thus be familiar to the kitchen staff.

No, Susan. I know people who don't even go into galleries. They have absolutely no time or use for art.

You and I both have brothers like that, David.

True. Although my brother likes music and had some interest in architecture. None whatever in painting or sculpture or heaven forbid media art.

No interest in either performance art or theatre.

None.

David and Susan ordered refills of their morning tea.

We both saw that movie *The Square*, right David?

Yes. That movie.

Yes, I mean relational aesthetics already satirized itself from the get-go.

Art is for the one percent. Too easy and I don't think true. Art systems, mind you, are another story.

For some people, yes. There have always been people who only like art if its useful...like banners and posters and theatre props.

And there always will be such people, Susan. But where are they coming from?

Who knows? Like Ray at the video co-op. He doesn't like art except for agitprop theatre.

Oh. I know who you mean. Miserable sod.

Anthony laughed. He also knew people who thought they were radical by not liking art. To him, a philistine was a philistine.

It was Smithson who stated that art was important precisely because of its uselessness, right?

I believe so. That quote has been parroted and paraphrased ad nauseum.

And then there's the quasi-Situationist perspective that art is never separate from society.

The problem with that is that if taken to ultimate conclusion there is no longer anything that registers as art.

Well Asger Jorn was not at all a bad painter.

But, Susan. We both know people who don't like galleries. They only like public art.....radical theatre or public performance art. Which I have no use for unless it really fucks up everyday conceptions of what constitutes public space.

Hmmmm..... Let's order a couple of draughts.

David and Susan flagged the server as he delivered Anthony's breakfast. The Playlist switched over to a louder programme..all recognizably eighties tunes.

Anthony didn't mind the louder playlist. He thought the couple or not couple in the adjacent booth had taken their conversation as far as it could go. He liked art himself because it was useless and fun, although he would never dismiss someone's work for being too earnest if he thought it was effective. He did not think that propaganda was necessarily a bad thing. *The Look of Love* by ABC now played in the cafe. Anthony had liked this song decades ago. Love as real estate..how profound. Well, actually not really. But blasts from the past often were a pleasant distraction from all that was pretentious and ponderous.
Yippee ay yippie ay yay!

Anthony was awakened early by a fire engine rushing past his building. Then the fire engine stopped somewhere obviously not far from the building. Some of his neighbours were also awakened and then frantically getting dressed. The building superintendent was reassuring people that the fire was a couple of blocks away and that it was unlikely to spread as far as their building. Anthony was at least reassured that his building wasn't going to burn down. But where the hell was the fire? And why had there been a fire? The superintendent exchanged reassuring banalities with the tenants and then Anthony asked him what did he know. 'It's further west on the other side of the street. It's just past the stop light.' Anthony swallowed. 'It's that cafe on the corner and then the next two buildings west. A cannabis outlet and I forget what else.' His favourite convenient cafe was burning down. How did the fire get started? And why? The superintendent smirked. 'Russian owners. You figure it out.' 'What?'. The superintendent now moved onto other building tenants. Russian owners? The superintendent was full of shit. The cafe was a Chinese restaurant with Vietnamese owners. But did the people managing the cafe own the building? Were they renters? If so, from whom? What was in the units above the cafe? Apartments? What and who were in those apartments? Anthony scowled. The building superintendent was prone to stupid conspiracy theories. He was after all an anti-vaxxer. The superintendent was an acid head who'd watched Dr. Strangelove a few too many times. Anthony decided to return to his unit and go back to bed . If there were more sirens they would be reinforcements, but there was no need to be evacuating the building. No need to panic, Anthony wanted to scream. He wanted to scream *Moratorium on Stupid Russian Conspiracy Theories!*. But he didn't.

