

If it's good for you, it's fine by me

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“Seedy bar in Santa Barbara. The billiard player’s red braces. Foucault, Sartre, and Orson Welles all standing together at the counter, strangely convincing, strikingly like the originals. ‘Cocktail scenery’, The smell of violence. The stale odor of beer. ‘Hustling is prohibited.’”

— *Jean Baudrillard, America*

“It’s quarter to three/ There’s no one in the place/Except you and me/So, set ‘em up, Joe/I got a little story you oughta know/We’re drinkin’, my friend/To the end of a brief episode/Make it one for my baby/And one more for the road...I’m feelin’ so bad/ Wish you’d make the music easy and sad.”

— *One for My Baby, One More for the Road*, performed by Frank Sinatra

There are these old American jazz standards which evoke a scene of someone alone at the bar around closing time, in a trance-like state of memory, monologuing to the bartender about a past love or self. There’s a reluctance to share but an inability to help oneself: “I don’t know why I’m telling you this, maybe it’s the music maybe it isn’t only the music...there’s something about this place...”

It’s surely the alcohol too but it’s more than that. There is an atmosphere that generates a feeling of warmth, intimacy, a melancholic haze, forgetting one’s troubles or facing them only through the fog of inebriation. There’s a desire for the bar to consume and reflect one’s state of mind. I think of Philip Marlowe, in *The Long Goodbye*, wandering into his local watering hole to check his messages, the theme of the film being played by the bar’s pianist. Or Neely O’Hara in the second act of *Valley of the Dolls*, at the height of her downfall, entering a dive bar incognito, dressed down in sunglasses, and playing her own hit song on the jukebox, singing along. There’s an open bottle of whiskey on the bar, piles of peanut shells, full ashtrays.

The bar is the place to quell or indulge one’s loneliness. The best bars are old ones, whose model is sustained by its quantity over quality, its success defined by crowdedness and the ambiance determined by the clientele it attracts. The dive relies on drunks and locals crammed into a small space with no smoking patio except the street. Spaces like these engage an unlikely combination of candor, cheapness, and a kind of authenticity, an irrepressible personality formed by the diversity of patrons. They are a perfect combination of grime and glamour.

The artists in “If it’s good for you, it’s fine by me” have produced elegiac odes to the bar, feeling the lack of its presence throughout the year, its emptiness and mourning those spaces that have not survived (pouring one out). Serving as an indexical record based in memory, the works attempt to recreate it but somehow fail to do so, too small or too big. But the failure is profound and meaningful reflecting an inability to recreate an atmosphere which relies on the presence of people, of crowds, sharing a small space, the way time moves when one is drinking, the thrill of being in a room with strangers, the ritual of communal leisure. The bar operates on the thing that this airborne virus has precisely and almost vengefully denied: shared particles, getting too close, turning your head to lend your ear for someone to shout in. To do so is possibly even fatal.