

Bars, Please Turn Off Your Televisions



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In Old Hollywood -- that glorified era that still occupies the minds of thousands of dream-seeking L.A. newcomers both young and old -- ideas were born, scripts were hatched, romances kindled, careers built or smashed, in bars. Musso & Frank and The Writer's Room, The Dresden and The Brown Derby, The Pig and Whistle and Formosa Café -- these were the conversation rooms of our idols and predecessors. A sanctuary of human interaction, the bar was where one focused one's attention squarely on talk and drink.

In today's Hollywood, the bars are filled with people whose exchange of ideas is jilted by the existence of a bright, flashing box over the bar from which emanates a sitcom or a talk show interspersed with frenetic commercials. Conversation becomes interrupted as patrons' eyes are drawn to the effulgent image of a young man with a silly face biting into a McMuffin.

The vast majority of L.A.'s bars have televisions, and not just sports bars, but Mexican cantinas, the old world pubs, the Golden Era revival bars, the lounges, the gastropubs. It doesn't matter the theme of the bar -- they almost all have TV's whose screens glow much brighter than the face of the person sitting next to you.

Obviously, in a sports bar, the television is the main draw. For a sports bar to turn their televisions to a non-sports channel would be sacrilege. However in non-sports bars, you'll find that the televisions are more often than not turned to entertainment channels. As music plays a significant part in helping people loosen up and drink up, the television is usually muted, making the watching of it (when it's not turned to a game, the plays of which can easily be followed without sound) utterly pointless.

I've lived and regularly bar-hopped in Salt Lake City, New York City, and San Francisco, and upon moving to Los Angeles was surprised at how many more bars here had televisions, as compared to those other cities. L.A. is the entertainment capital of the world -- is that why its obsession with the moving image has invaded its watering

holes? Must we, as Angelenos, be so constantly tuned to mass media, that we have to have a TV on in every establishment? I recently took to finding out: Can we turn the TV's off?

On a recent Thursday night on Cahuenga Boulevard, I sat with a group of friends in the Blue Boar, an old-word style English pub with a dark and intimate interior, antique décor and a drink menu featuring, along with inventive cocktails, hand-pulled cask ale. On this warm Indian summer evening, the pub was surprisingly not crowded. Aside from the twelve people in my group, there were only four other people -- two couples sitting at the bar.

My friends and I sat along the bench seats parallel to the bar. As I chatted with my friends, my attention kept wandering over their heads, to the two large flat screen TVs over the bar. They were turned to a re-run of The Office. As my friends opposite me conversed about L.A.'s bicycle culture, I watched Pam and Jim hatch a prank against Dwight, and then I watched a lime set fire to a chip in a Taco Bell commercial (that Doritos Loco Taco looks soooo gross).

I looked around and saw that everyone on my side of the bench seats kept sporadically flitting their eyes up to the TVs, though they were all trying desperately not to. In such a dark establishment, we were drawn to the bright screens like moths to a light bulb, but not one of us was actually interested in watching television. The four people at the bar were equally disinterested in the TVs. Since no one was invested in watching them, I wondered if the bartenders would be willing to turn them off. Much like when the air conditioner is on too high at a bar, and everyone is cold -- if you ask that the air conditioner be turned off, the bartenders usually oblige.

I went to the bar to get another drink, and then very politely, asked, "Would you turn off the TV's?"

The bartender cocked his head a little bit.

"Turn them off? Sorry, no. We can change the channel, but we can't kill them," he said.

"Oh, okay. It's just that no one's watching them and they're really bright," I explained.

"Yeah, sorry." he shrugged.

I returned to my seat and told my friends. The rerun of The Office had ended, and Conan had come on. My friend remarked, "What's the point of playing a talk show if you can't hear them talk?"

I went back to the Blue Boar recently to ask if leaving the televisions on at all times is a policy. The bartender informed me that, no, it isn't. And he didn't think the TVs draw clientele into the bar, or encourage them to drink more. Yet generally he didn't think they wouldn't consider turning them off. "They're just part of the bar," he said. "Turn them off, and you'll just have two dark, empty squares over the bar. That'd be weird. People would think they're broken."

"You said that you don't think people necessarily come here for the TVs, but you think it would be a problem if they were turned off?" I asked.

"Well, there are some people who go to bars alone and who want something to do, something to entertain them. The TVs makes them more comfortable."

It became a circular conversation, ending with the bartender's definitive statement that "bars just have TVs."

I don't mean to pick on the Blue Boar, as they aren't the only offenders. Last time I was at Tony's Saloon, a great old-school neighborhood bar downtown, I also asked them if they'd turn off the thing, which was tuned to a re-run of The Big Bang Theory. The manager was utterly irritated by my request.

"Seriously? No. Just, no," he huffed. I felt embarrassed for having asked.

In her book *America Walks into a Bar*, Christine Sismondo writes that historically, bars served as public spaces to air grievances, and contributed to the birth of many a political and rights-expanding movement. Throughout history, the bar has functioned as a center of political and cultural expression. Would Paul Revere be lauded as an American Hero today had he been too distracted by Burger King commercials to continue his conversation in Boston's Green Dragon Saloon with Samuel Adams and John Adams about their plan against the British? Would Jack London have been as influenced by the seamen that frequented Heinold's First and Last Chance Saloon, or have even met Alexander McLean who became his muse in *The Sea-Wolf*, had his attention been scattered by re-runs on TBS?

I fear that perpetually-on televisions will be the undoing of America's great bar culture. In an age when we're already distracted by the small screens we all carry in our pockets, we already have to work hard to focus our attention where it belongs: on the company we keep. Hence, for the sake of mankind and all that makes us great, I call for a new cultural revolution, aimed at the proprietors of our drinking establishments: turn the TV's off.