

## *Venetian Eyes*

Unspoken communication with strangers on the streets of Venice is nearly impossible.

Without realizing it, I've practiced fleeting interactions with strangers for years. Last night, I stumbled across a line in an old notebook which described such eye contact, *eye-cons*, as more unusual in Paris than in New York. In New York, *eyecons* can be the highlight of a walk. I now see they are far more common in Paris than in Venice.

A full eyecon starts with eye contact and is consummated with a nod. It is the nod which interests me most. A nod is a distinctly old-fashioned gesture practiced primarily by older men. Nods are probably a bastardization of tipping the hat, or, more formally, bowing. A wave is a far less intimate form of contact between humans; it requires seeing the other person. But actual eye contact is generally not involved, the distance is usually too great.

The modern nod, when accomplished correctly, is nearly invisible; so subtle that even an intimate, walking alongside you, is not aware of the contact you had with a passerby, a total stranger. Unlike sex, eyecons are so intimate, so fleeting, that there is no room for more than two to participate. Luckily, diseases cannot be communicated through eye contact. On the other hand, eyecons cannot be practiced to improve health or to effectively take off weight; a proper nod only burns approximately .000008 calorie.

For all its minimalistic qualities, the nod can be a surprisingly significant action. No bells or whistles—no sound at all. They may not be high fashion, but they remain on the cutting edge. Like good art or literature, eyecons are mysteriously satisfying. They leave the participants with a feeling of connection and wonder; and they often give rise to internal questions. What more can visual art, music or poetry strive for, except perhaps to tell a story? Eyecons are abstract, you make up your own story of what was “said” or “received.”

I imagine some people don't know what I'm talking about. The Venetians certainly don't.

Eyecons generally happen when two people are approaching on parallel, but not intersecting, trajectories. Humans, like most other animals (when not in a complete funk) are curious; it's part of a primordial instinct related to mating and territory. Who's approaching? Instead of antlers, we have body types, hairstyles and clothes to tell our stories at a glance.

Precisely what happens is as follows: eye contact (foundation building) followed by a nod of various amplitudes, not a wink. The nod occurs a microsecond after the eye contact. The chin leads with a sharp, but extremely small, downward motion. Some are larger than others. The motion is very rapid. The other person responds in kind. There is no change of facial expression. The amplitude relates to the feeling and mood; it does not affect the contact. The two people must be on crossing paths, but the interaction can only happen when the two are close enough to make eye contact and must be completed before they pass each other.

Nothing more to it. I attempted this form of communication whenever an opportunity presented itself during my time in Venice. I spend several hours each day on the streets, usually in relatively untraveled parts of town. Only occasionally would the moment be right—passing an elderly gentleman at the crest of a bridge, for example. But, nothing would happen. Eye contact in Venice, though possible, is rare; the full cycle of an eyecon is as elusive as a good loaf of bread in this city. It's not that the Venetians are not looking; they are. They look, they see—and then, they look away. Communication is not part of it. This practice may date all the way back to the days of the Republic when a person could lose his or her head for espionage simply by interacting briefly with a foreigner.

The nearest I've come to a Venetian eyecon was with an elderly woman. We made solid contact, but no nod. That was the closest during nearly a month of walking. Perhaps an eyecon only happens once a month in New York. I have never kept track, but I believe it's more frequent than that. A significant majority of my eyecon experiences have been with men. They hold a different kind of energy than typically exists between men and women.

The paucity of eyecons could explain another phenomenon I've noticed in Venice. People greet each other as they pass; this is common and pleasant to witness, as it provides a sense of the real community which, in Venice, can easily be lost amongst the multitude of visitors. These greetings can happen anywhere, but they are especially easy to observe as one person disembarks from a vaporetto while another is waiting to board, or vice versa. One person recognizes, then starts the interaction, but frequently there is an awkward delay in the other person's response. Then, after an observable few moments, an invisible barrier lifts and the connection is made. Having seen this same pattern many times, I concluded that the people were simply not making contact with those around them. The Venetian protection instinct is strong; this short pause in recognition is common. At first, I was sure that one Venetian did not actually recognize the other, but I was wrong. In America this type of chance meeting would commonly involve a more simultaneous acknowledgment, often with a degree of false greetings and embraces, even when the parties don't know one another well. The intimacy of the subsequent interaction between these two Venetians revealed that the connection was genuine.

These cool then warm encounters perplexed me until I considered them in the context of what I'd learned pursuing the elusive Venetian eyecon.

January 31, 1998

Venice, Italy

James Boorstein

© 2020

Courtesy of Box 3 Productions