

# The Sydney Morning Herald

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## **Eye Anxiety**

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Looks can't kill, writes Simon Palan, but they are seriously uncool.

If the eyes are the window to the soul then, these days, the curtains are drawn. Modern social standards have dropped eye contact as an accepted common courtesy and it has become more acceptable to keep to your eyes-to-the-ground, lonesome self.

In a completely non-threatening, non-sexual, non-serial-killer attempt at human kinship I have tried to lure strangers' attention, for even a moment, but have learnt from experience not to expect them to return the favour.

When did it become compulsory to avoid eye contact? It seems people have done away with their community spirit and replaced it with an impenetrable ice-cool facade.

Undaunted, I still pursue that elusive, enchanted moment when two eyes meet and a tiny but merciful association is made. I can clearly remember establishing this connection as a youngster, but I've come to think that my lost youth may not be the only reason people keep looking away.

The growing use of email and text messaging may have something to do with it. We have been led to believe these new media enhance our lives. Instead, I believe they're eroding our once flamboyant interpersonal skills to a point where many of us feel more at ease communicating through electronic impulses from opposite sides of the earth.

Meet someone eyeball to eyeball and suddenly the profound humour or engaging friendship that exists online vanishes faster than you can say: "Let's stay in touch; I'll message you soon."

While prolonged eye contact on public transport has never been encouraged, the book of social standards lists it as the No1 crime in lifts, leaving passengers with nowhere to look but under their fingernails or at the illuminated floor numbers tracking the lift's slow trajectory.

In the presence of others, comfort is normally attained by setting limits of personal space. In lifts, the bubble of personal space bursts as soon as the doors close. Our way of compensating is to refuse to acknowledge the presence of others and, most important, avoiding eye contact at all costs.

When travelling up from the ground floor we get to a point, somewhere around the fifth floor, where the silence becomes unbearable. We shuffle papers, pick dust off our clothes or pretend to be asleep. Not even the most adventurous lift users glance at other passengers. It's an unwritten law, similar to those well known among men standing at urinals.

While eye contact becomes a lost art to people like myself, a company called **Inlink Technologies** has begun installing digital screens into the lifts of hotels and office buildings, such as the Citigroup Centre in Park Street.

The screens broadcast news and weather information to no doubt grateful lift users keen for a diversion from the silent office worker breathing down their neck.

With a bit of luck, the screens may even trigger a conversation or two. **Inlink** research shows the average office worker takes about six lift rides a day, each lasting 30 to 40 seconds. Each month, workers average 80 minutes spent in silence in lifts.

So if you ever share a lift or pass a bloke giving you an acknowledging nod or a polite smile, please don't think he's a freak.

Go on, make his day, give him a wink ... and keep walking, quickly.