

## Seductive welcomes

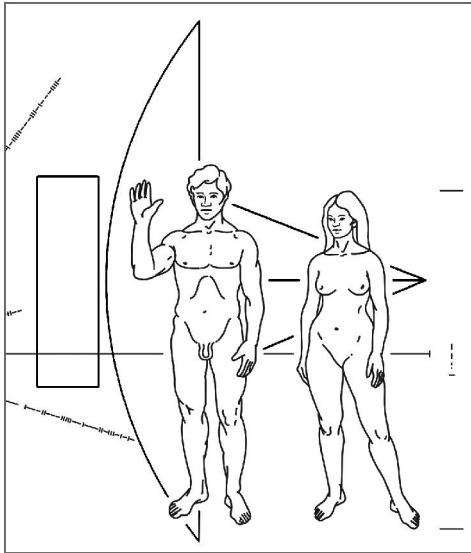
Gestures of welcome are under pressure. They have been re-written and extended to include what some call the techniques of hospitality and others the empty rituals of welcome. In both cases the welcomer's own interests are embedded at the core of the behaviour. Everyone is familiar with the kind of thing I'm thinking about here, it appears in television adverts and in the newspapers, perhaps in the form of the beaming bank employee who is completely at your service and maintains a personal as well as professional 24-hour interest in your financial future and personal well-being. Or the grinning fast food servers who have strict instructions—on pain of losing their job—to smile a welcome (and a goodbye too). Of course you might argue that the first example does not deal with reality, simply a (corporate) image which is actually being used to misdirect attention from the real interest of the bank – the prosperity of its owners, and that the second is a banal situation that everyone can read. After all, no-one expects anything more than simple civility from someone who actually has little real choice in the matter. We in the West are permanently involved in a high-volume flow of increasingly enigmatic and simulated welcomes that are simply preludes to commercial transactions. The question is, what does the artifice do to our realities?

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## Welcomes of the Future Past

Or take the welcome attached to the Pioneer 10 probe, for example. Sent off on a journey into space in the early 1970s, it shows an (ethnically white) male in outline,



one arm raised “as a gesture of goodwill” located at the side of a depiction of a (passive, non-welcoming, ethnically white) woman. There was some controversy about the depiction, most of it related to whether the people should be wearing clothes or not. It doesn’t take much imagination to visualize the man in a uniform, police or military, thus changing the “welcome” into a “halt”.

The message will be able to be read by the inhabitants of planets in the neighbourhood” of Aldebaran in about two million years. Whatever the interpretation the recipients might make in the future, if they arrived today they would, I suppose, still be subject to the EU/US requirement that they apply for a visa in their country of origin.

### **Welcome to reality**

The most differentiated gesture of welcome I’ve experienced in recent months took place in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. An hour or so out of San Cristobal de Las Casas, when mist still clung to the hillsides and, despite periodic outbursts of sun, rain seemed immanent, we get out of the collective taxi to be faced with a drop-down road barrier that blocked the entrance to the Zapatista village situated on a slope that falls away from the main road. We wait there for a few minutes till two bandana-



masked men come to the barrier. One of them asks what we want and, after our explanation, tells us to wait. He leaves, the other says it will take a while, we should make ourselves comfortable. He returns with a masked woman in a *huipil* (blouse) that indicates the small town she originally came from. "These are the rules, " she says: "I'm going to be your guide, you can take photographs but not of any people." We agree, walk round the barrier and she begins to lead us through the village. They no longer get many visitors she tells us. Not like in the beginning when dozens of people came everyday, some of whom stayed to paint some of the murals we see on almost every building, providing a visual catalogue of the central issues of the Zapatista revolt, the core of their demands for land, autonomy, access to education, health care, equality for women etc. These (local) demands led to a full-scale clash with the interests of central government and national and international investment interests whose concerns were more in implementing the provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement—which stipulates, among other things, that traditionally communally-owned land be reduced to a freely alienable commodity—as well as asserting control over the oil, mining, and other sub-soil rights, water and timber rights and the right to develop a tourist industry, all with minimum or no consultation with the local (Maya) people and mestizo *campesinos*. The effect has been a continuous and substantial military presence in the area, violence and murder by militias and vigilantes covertly



supported by the state and federal government and, even in the quietest of times, what has been termed "repressive tolerance". The self-organized school was functioning with pupils and students of all ages, people went about their normal

activities, including cooking, weaving and working in the fields. Afterwards it was almost impossible to resist comparing the political manipulation and instrumentalization of hysterical xenophobic reflexes in Europe in the context of asylum and refugees and the open matter-of-factness of people who live under a permanent threat of intimidation and violence.



Three gestures of welcome: one that fulfils all a welcome's visible criteria but is almost completely concerned with its own unmentioned agenda; one designed to signal welcome to visitors from outer space using a depiction that fixes its lack of understanding of ethnicity and gender roles (and thus the fact that it represents only a small minority of humanity) for eons; and one that is an encounter with socio-political reality – something tentative, under continuous negotiation, as mutually respectful as a palm-touching Mayan handshake.

(Tim Sharp)

