

Just for a Laugh

A review of the film



Welcome to the Sticks

(2008)

Dany Boon (Director)

Reviewed by

[Keith Oatley](#)

Welcome to the Sticks, directed by Dany Boon and written by Dany Boon, Alexandre Charlot, and Franck Magnier, is said to have been France's most successful film of all time. It's about a post office manager, Philippe (Kad Merad), and his grumpy, difficult wife, Julie (Zoé Félix). They live in Provence, but she leans on him to get a transfer to the French Riviera. To help his chances of such a favorable move, it seems Philippe needs to be disabled.

By the time an inspector arrives to check his transfer application, Philippe has bought a wheelchair. But his performance as a disabled person is wanting, his ruse is discovered, and, perhaps as a punishment meted out by the Post Office Human Relations Department, he is transferred to Bergues at the opposite end of France, near the English Channel coast. Dwellers in the south think that this is the North Pole, and Julie refuses to accompany him there.

On the day before he is due to start in his new position, Philippe sets out in his car, alone and reluctant. When stopped by the police for driving too slowly on the highway, he

explains that he has been transferred to the north. "Be brave," says the cop, and lets him go without a fine.

Some reviewers have thought that, like Philippe, this film might not travel well. I do not agree. When I saw it at a cinema in Toronto, I thought it was the laugh-out-loud funniest film I had ever seen. Watching it again, I found it funny once more, and that takes some doing for a film seen for a second time, on DVD.

The person in Bergues to whom Philippe becomes closest is a mail carrier, Antoine (played by director Dany Boon). When Philippe first arrives, late at night in a downpour, Antoine offers him his bedroom in the small house where he lives with his mother (Line Reynaud), *une femme formidable*. Antoine pretends it's a spare room, and he himself sleeps on the couch in the living room.

The humor of the early scenes in Bergues derives in part from interchanges in which the local dialect, Ch'ti, is at first almost incomprehensible to Philippe. In Ch'ti, s-sounds are pronounced "sh," and "a" is pronounced "o." On Philippe's first day, the post office workers take him to lunch at the French Fry Shack on the town square where he joins the others in having fricadelle (a local delicacy) and fries. He finds the fricadelle surprisingly good, and asks what's in it. "Can't ask whatsh in it," says a counter clerk from the post office. The ingredients are secret. "Like Americansh and Coco-Colo." One would have thought that word play would be impossible to translate, but the writer of the English subtitles has managed it: Some of the subtitles are wonderfully witty.

The plot of the film is based on the warmth and helpfulness of the staff of the Bergues Post Office, who gather up furniture for the unfurnished apartment that has been arranged for him and enable Philippe to be happy in his new position. As he starts to feel welcome in Bergues, almost unintentionally he finds himself maintaining in phone calls to his wife that his posting is exactly the penury they had anticipated. The result is that Julie becomes understanding where she had been demanding, sympathetic where she had been self-involved, affectionate where she had been cool.

Every two weeks, Philippe goes to see Julie in Provence. Just as his job is better than it has ever been, so, now, is his relationship with her. But, after a few weekends of this, Julie has become so sorry for Philippe, because of what she believes to be his terrible predicament, that she decides to move with him to Bergues. He confides to his post office staff that he has told his wife that the people of Bergues are coarse and his situation is miserable so, when she arrives, they put on a show of making everything seem far more awful than she could have imagined.

This film is not of the kind in which one might laugh at someone slipping on a banana skin. Instead the director and actors have contrived a joining-in-together laughter, in which they take part. The credits that run at the end of the film are accompanied by outtakes of Merad and Boon on the set in scenes in which they cannot restrain their laughter so that they have to start the shots again. And, best of all during the film, the viewer seems just naturally to take part laughingly, too.

Why do people laugh? This was the question asked in a famous essay by Henri Bergson (1900/1911). He thought there were three pointers. First, laughter is completely human. We could not, he said, imagine laughing at a landscape, and we laugh at animals only when they display human qualities. Bergson made the memorable suggestion that it's funny to see humans behaving in a machinelike way; it reminds us that human voluntariness is fragile and also that the societies in which we live can have machinelike properties.

Second, said Bergson, we do not laugh unless we are a bit detached. We do not, for instance, laugh at someone for whose predicament we feel sympathy. Third, said Bergson, laughter is social; we laugh only when we are in touch with others. Laughter needs a social echo. Bergson's essay is thought provoking: a good starting point for thinking about the psychology of laughter.

How have Bergson's ideas about laughter fared over a hundred years? Not badly, actually. His first hypothesis needs to be modified a bit because, like other traits that have seemed solely human, laughter has been found to have forerunners and equivalents in our animal cousins. Vettin and Todt (2005) have shown close correspondences between human laughter and the play sounds of macaques and chimpanzees during close bodily contact such as play wrestling and tickling.

Panksepp (2005) wrote of how laughing emerges naturally in babies and is carried on as children play such games as tag, with the one being chased laughing more than the one doing the chasing. He reported that rats emit chirping sounds when they play with each other and that, when humans tickle them so that they emit these sounds, the rats become bonded to these particular humans. He reports, too, that the subcortical brain systems that are activated during playful rat chirping are the same as those activated in humans when they laugh.

The second hypothesis also needs some updating. Laughter does not exactly mean detachment. Bergson acknowledged that laughter is not always innocent, and that its effects on others can be painful. In a recent analysis, Billig (2005) has argued further in this direction that laughter often derives from ridicule, which is an effective means of social control. In this sense we can see some of the effects of racist and sexist jokes, typically made to each other by members of ingroups at the expense of outgroups. The powerless are not deprived of this resource; antigovernment jokes often flourish in repressive regimes, at least in those that are not too efficient in their repression.

But Bergson's third hypothesis seems exactly right. Laughter is a social process that draws people together. In our evolutionary past, in our individual development, and in our adult lives, the solidarity-producing, relationship-building, group-defining effects of laughter have been and remain important. And it is thinking in an evolutionary and group psychological way that has prompted the modifications to Bergson's ideas by Vettin and Todd, by Panksepp, and by Billig. The results of the modifications have been to strengthen and elaborate Bergson's hypothesis that laughter is social.

If you feel affection toward France, if you enjoy joining in as you watch a film that is warmhearted and only a tad sentimental, and if you like laughing out loud at a movie, you

may well take to *Welcome to the Sticks*. But if you are not much interested in France or if you think french fries should have been renamed freedom fries, then this film may not be for you.

References

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