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The Anti-Americans (A hate/love relationship)

A film by Louis Alvarez, Andrew Kolker, and Peter Odabashian

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SYNOPSIS

The Anti-Americans (a hate/love relationship) is a whimsical yet serious look at the estrangement between Europeans and America over the last few years. The program travels to Ireland, France, Poland, and Great Britain to examine its thesis that each country responds to American culture and society in its own unique way, based on its own cultural needs, history, and prejudices.

The film begins in Dublin at a session of *Leviathan*, a spirited series of pub debates, where we first get to sense some of the resentment facing America, especially in the post-Iraq era. An opening sequence follows, featuring vox pop and a variety of pungent talking heads, in which anti-Americanism is put into a cultural context and we hear examples of some of the sneering that goes on when America is mentioned.

Then we're off to France, to visit the studios of *Les Guignols de l'Info*, or News Puppets – hilariously satirical giant marionettes who travesty the evening news. Over the program's twenty year history, America has come to be represented by a series of Sylvester Stallone puppets, "*les Slys*", who symbolize the reach of American power militarily, economically, and even in the religious world.

Elsewhere in France, we attend a session of one of the nineteen Ministry of Culture committees charged with coming up with French words for English terms. This meeting is about car terms, and a spirited denunciation of "airbag" is taking place. Commentary from historian Tony Judt and philosopher Pascal Bruckner place this in the context of France seeking to carve out a place in a world that seems increasingly alien to its culture, throwing down the gauntlet at the Anglo-American hegemon.

A trip to the small southern city of Montauban, famed for its fresh local produce, reveals a deeply insecure society worried about the incursions of McDonalds and the loss of leisure time and French *joie de vivre* in favor of American-style work-too-hard entrepreneurial capitalism. And this is something that is the essence of being French, and helps explain the sharp rhetoric and concern.

But elsewhere in France, the glories of living are not in such evidence. In the housing projects surrounding the cities, the children of immigrants talk about the lure America has precisely *because* it seems to offer opportunity for all, unlike the closed French system. A visit to some wannabe rappers, Grand Boulevard, shows how the America that is reflected in pop culture can offer an appealing vision that might not be appreciated by the French elites.

Finally, we pay a visit to the Lycée Henri IV, an exclusive Parisian school that grooms the future elites of France. Here, the children offer drawings and essays about America's behavior in the world, and the news is not encouraging for transatlantic friendship. Soldiers kill Iraqis, Americans are fat and illiterate, and we're "massacring the planet", as one sweetfaced girl says.

Chastened, but conscious of the cultural aspect of all these feelings, we move on to Poland, a place where the past is very much alive. After a horrible Nazi occupation and fifty years of Communism, the Poles are very conscious that they could be vulnerable to nasty neighbors, and they need a strong protector...the United States.

We hear from a variety of Poles about how no matter how often the Communists tried to discredit America domestically, the US always ended up more popular than before with ordinary Polish people. And even today, twenty years after the Wall came down, the affection for America is palpable in people like Michael Lonstar, a leading Polish country-western singer. Lonstar dresses like a New Age Hollywood Indian, has a dance troupe called Sexy Texas, and writes country-western songs, in Polish, with a decidedly Polish character. He speaks movingly about how he came to listen to Ernest Tubbs on the Voice of America when he was a little boy, and how the stereotypical images of the open road and the prairie nourished him and others through the bleak Soviet period.

Then it's off to Piknik Country, the oldest country music festival in Eastern Europe, where the positive vibes towards America couldn't feel further from Western Europe. But we soon learn that there's an impediment to harmonious relations: America's visa policy, which keeps the number of Poles admitted to the US to a manageable number, but which is taken by the Poles as a slap in the face from an old friend – doubly insulting, since Poland sent troops to Iraq on the US' behalf.

The disquiet spreads as we are given a tour of Warsaw by some outspoken taxi drivers, who take pains to point out the expensive new buildings going up downtown – all built by foreign, often American, capital. Poland, invaded so often in its history, continues to feel taken advantage of – this time by the country it feels should be its closet friend. And so the complications continue...

Finally, we visit London, heart of an empire that handed off power to the Yanks fifty years ago. On the diplomatic level, Brits talk constantly about the "special relationship" they have with America – a reference to shared use of power and prestige – only to be continually brought up short when the Americans appear not to be familiar with the concept.

Here we find another conflicted society. Many feel superior to Americans in the way a “mother culture” often does – more gracious, more intelligent, less brash. At the same time, there is an enormous fascination with American society, especially its weirder extremes. A steady stream of TV presenters from the UK (Alan Whicker, Clive James, Louis Therou) come to visit the wilder shore of America (gun nuts, survivalists, plastic surgeons, and the like) to offer their ironically detached commentary about the derangements of the Americans.

It all comes together metaphorically speaking in *Jerry Springer the Opera*, a peculiarly English work of art that sums up the ambivalence the British feel for America. This brilliant work, of which we see excerpts and speak to the creators, takes a Jerry Springer show and sets it to music. There’s a KKK chorus line and fat men dressed as babies...a mixture of satire, sneering, and genuine affection for the vitality of what the US offers to the rest of the world, stupid as some of it is.

The Anti-Americans ends with some thoughts on cultural attitudes and wonders whether American stock will rise again after Iraq fades away in the European mind (assuming such a thing is possible). The film suggests that, while opinions wax and wane, underneath it all are some fundamentally unvarying attitudes towards the US, often based on Europe’s own psychological and political needs. The transatlantic conversation will continue to be shocking and amusing for some time to come.