Claude Fournier's
Les Tisserands du pouvoir Part I, II
(La Révolte)

As Part I of Claude Fournier's Les Tisserands du pouvoir begins, Baptiste Lambert (Grenier Gélinas), an old man who came to Weesocke, Rhode Island as a child, is exploring with anger because the local TV station plans to cancel its French-language broadcasts. Baptiste complains to the TV people and to municipal politicians, but they all dismiss him as a senile crank.

After all, times have changed. The textile mill Baptiste worked in when he was young is about to be torn down so that the Japanese can build a motorcycle parts factory. French is virtually a dead language in Weesocke, and hardly anybody thinks about the old days. For the town's Franco-American mayor (Donald Pilon) and the young generation, embodied by a rookie TV reporter (Frances Reddy), the Québécois heritage of the town is 'ancient history.'

Desperate, Baptiste puts up an one-man protest by hermitaging himself in a little outbuilding of the abandoned mill with a home-made bomb. Surrounded by a crowd of curious onlookers, hysterical politicians, and gun-chewing American cops, the old man decides to tell his story to the young TV journalist with no interest in his French Canadian roots. From this point on, most of Part I and Part II's (La Révolte) four hours consist of flashbacks framed by Baptiste's showdown against total assimilation into the American Way.

Tisserands' flashbacks follow the adventures of three families, who, as the film progresses, connect with each other in various, sometimes remarkably coincidental ways. The Lamberts, Baptiste's family, represent the poverty-stricken French Canadians who migrated to New England in the early 20th century, while the Fontaines typify the middle-class Québécois who also headed south. The Roussels, an industrial dynasty from France, are the kind of only multinational entrepreneurs who built textile mills in New England and coldly exploited people like the young Baptiste (Denis Bouchard) and his father Valmore (Michel Forget).

The old Baptiste, who never leaves the old mill, is certainly an ambitious production.

Claude Fournier calls it "a big, complex story" and a "mosaic of impressions" that add up to a total picture of the people whose lives revolve around Weesocke's mills of power. Unfortunately, some of the pieces of this mosaic are not especially captivating.

Part I of Les Tisserands, much more so than Part II, tilts toward the Roussels (the picture is a Canada-France co-production). When we are with them in France as they engage in family disputes and extravagant beach parties, we are really in the familiar TV territory of the enviable wealthy mini-series dynasty. M. Roussel (Jean Deslauriers) details his weight around. Mme. Roussel (legendary French actress Madeline Robertson) irks, and fireworks literally go off when young Jacques (Aurelien Recolte) romances a flamboyantly bohemian actress (Corinne Dacle), who gives Tisserand's period mise-en-scène a startling flash of full frontal nudity.

The Roussels' scenes don't add up to much in themselves, and they also don't have emotionally contrastual relationship to the scenes that portray the Lamberts, the Fontaines, and the other Québécois migrants. The sequences in France, and later in Part I, scenes portraying a decadent Montreal milieu in which haute-bourgeoisie meets haute-bohémien, glut up the movie. But they also dilute the impact of Tisserand's central drama and theme, the latter disillusionment of the Québécois who migrated south.

In Jean de Florette/Maman des Sources, another four-hour picture released in two parts, Claude Berri builds up a mystical, epic mise-en-scène, but the story concentrates sharply on only four characters, who are revealed in mesmerizing detail.

Tisserands, especially Part I, cuts at top speed from one set of its numerous characters to another. You don't have enough time to connect firmly enough with vivid, but only broadly outlined, central figures like Valmore Lambert, or Emile Fontaine (Pierre Chagnon), the young doctor who goes on a crusade for the factory workers. Emile's father (Clement Richard, a former Quebec cabinet minister) appears and drops dead in the same scene. (Fournier jokes, "We don't deal with his funeral - so that's one funeral out of Canadian films.")

Despite these problems, Les Tisserands du pouvoir consistently holds your attention partly because Fournier knows how to build rough-hewn, but potently dramatic or comic moments. In one dynamic set piece, the migrants prepare for their first St. Jean-Baptiste, and the camera pans dozens of kids dressed up in angelic lamb costumes, the last with a cigarette dangling from his lips. Later in the picture, the Archbishop of Montreal (TV personality Claude Corbeil) pompously asks Simone Fontaine (Gabrielle Lazure) whether she's ever had 'commerce with a man.' The elegantly dressed Lazure climbs onto the Archbishop's well-appointed desk, spreads her legs, and asks him if he would like to perform the examination himself. As Corbeil munches on a cookie and stares baldly, she...