the film as political actor

Two Solitudes was intended to rekindle the national debate. In fact, it was greeted with a good deal of indifference. Below, Doug Issac gives us his analysis, situating the film in a political context. He explores to what degree current political biases have colored the film and questions whether this adaptation is true to the spirit of the Hugh MacLennan novel.

by Doug Isaacs

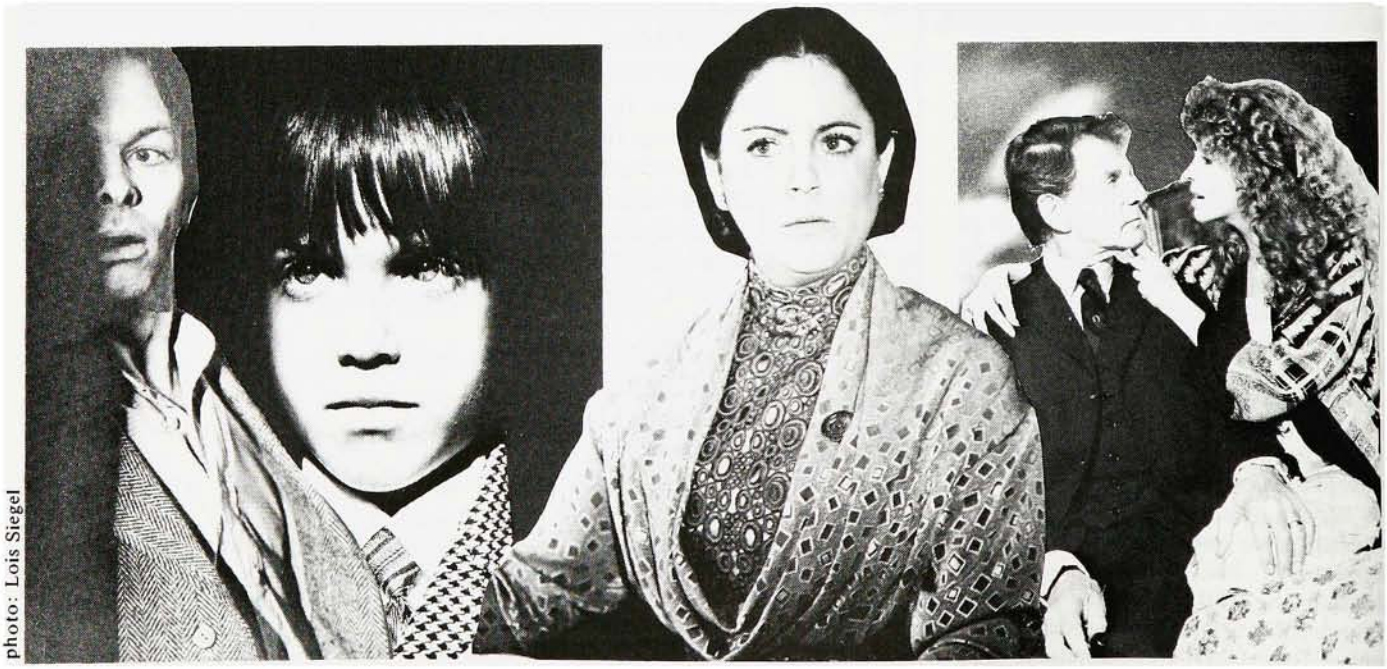

photo: Lois Siegel

The real actors: Raymond Cloutier, Stephen Rosenberg, Mary Pirie, Jean-Pierre Aumont and Gloria Carlin

First films from Canadian directors should be greeted with an open, "Cinemascopic" frame of mind. Their importance obviously lies not so much in how good the films are, but that they were made at all, that they have received distribution. And when a Canadian literary work is the source for that first film, each work can only gain from the other. Already the book **Two Solitudes** has been reissued, promotional stills from the film relegated to the back cover.

For several reasons, however, this first film can't be approached objectively:

The producers have cast the film as a political actor. To discuss it, they have said, will help keep this country together. Promotional hype aside, it seems they have forgotten the last pop-cultural happening to create solidarity, to drive the Canadian masses into the streets, was Rocket Richard's mid-fifties suspension from Stanley Cup playoffs. Even the stylish exposé, **Les Ordres**, and the didactic experiment, **Action**, couldn't shake sensibilities shacked up in suburbia with the status quo.

This film, too, is more than the adaptation of a novel: it is the dramatization of a socio-political view of Canada already woven into the tattered tapesty of the country's common consciousness. We see the film not openly, but with a personal bias or even prejudice. (The filmmakers, ironically, were in much the same position as Borges' twentieth century Spaniard who wrote **Don Quixote** word for word from inspiration.) Indeed, the concept of "two solitudes" has now the weight of historical truth, the implication being that contemporary Canadians have no responsibility for its existence. Without a radicalization of sensibilities, this notion is about as easy to change as the space between sprocket holes.

Finally, the referendum **is** approaching in Quebec, its terms of reference clouded on one hand by an "economic crisis" (one wonders if not intentionally), and on the other hand by the Parti Québécois' frantic search for a wording of the question which will appear acceptable to all sides.

Concerned Canadians are searching their culture and its products – such as this film – for understanding and clarification.

Any discussion of the **Two Solitudes** film must then underline the current political biases and how these – intentionally or not – may have colored the adaptation. At issue here is not where the plots diverge, but whether, to use Bazin's phrase, the film "restores the essence and spirit" of the novel, which was less propagandist than it was an impassioned study.

For our poemical purposes, the history of Canadian political film can be illustrated by the National Film Board's changing role. During the war the mandate was overtly propagandist. Since then it has evolved into a subtler perpetuation of the myth that despite our differences as groups or individuals the status-quo is good, albeit with a nudge left. Society in the sixties was resilient enough to absorb the few departures from this norm. Where radicalization may have occurred, among the Francophones, the cinematic sensitization of Quebecers was apparently fostered by the Board. But in controlling funds and distribution, what could have been an explosion was reduced to a few sparks. Nevertheless, freedom of expression seemed to be offered. Is this same "freedom of expression" also part of the **Two Solitudes** film?

The plot, at least, from which the politics of this film must be exhumed is reasonably faithful to the first half of the novel. Both are constructed around the efforts of J.C. Tallard (Jean Pierre Aumont) to bring industry to rural St. Marc, a fictionalized riding he represents federally. Although he has used "all his influence" to introduce electricity – read "progress," always a moral good in bourgeois mythology – industrialization is an idea implanted by Huntley McQueen (Stacy Keach). He is an Iago-like figure and the type of caricatured capitalist who would warm even the cold dialectic valves of Brecht's heart. McQueen induces Tallard to take all the risks, use his political influence, and raise start up capital by mortgaging the land handed down through Tallard's family since French colonial days.

Obstacles in the film are many: Father Beaubien (Claude Jutra) exudes a hint of Rabelaisian comportment and skepticism which, in the book, might better be described as hypocracy despite devotion. Tallard's son Marius (Raymond Cloutier) is against all that his father supports, including industrialization, conscription, and Tallard's second wife Kathleen (Gloria Carlin, Chetwynd's wife in "real life") and amidst these relationships, McQueen uses the economic uncertainties of World War I to manipulate Tallard.

Also mediating amongst these characters in both film and novel is Capt. John Yardley. He has retired from the sea and is a newly installed Anglophone in St. Marc, an anathema to Beaubien, instant confidant of Tallard and father of Janet Metheun (Mary Pirie), a chinless, prudish, Victorian do-gooder and bigot.

Names in novel and film may be the same, the situations may be similar. But the drama under discussion here is not one of comparing suspenses and similarities. Rather it is a drama of adaptation. What is "exciting" here is how the differences between book and film reflect political biases and what can be read from them.

The novel is organized into generally short, temporally successive or simultaneous chapters, a structure well suited to conventional film and duplicated here. In the film fade-outs are employed frequently between "scenes," and the black-outs are used for filmic, self-referring "jokes." In one instance a horse which has disappeared in the distance whinnies or laughs from very close by; in another, when McQueen evilly predicts Tallard's demise directly to the audience, the screen image dies, turns black. There devices may seem trivial, but are considered cinematically radical; they break-up filmic continuity, and encourage distancing. They could be clues to a directorial, political strategy.

Each novel chapter also centers around a single character, the events or relationship represented through his or her point of view. Multiple perspectives can emphasize social realities in both novels and films and deter the viewer/reader from identifying with a single character. But Chetwynd rejects this tactic; there is one viewpoint, that of the director. When sequences do deal with only one character, identification with that character seems to be encouraged – a reinforcement of bourgeois cinematic values. So it seems the director is uncertain whether he should be radical or conventional.

The novel at times seems to be informed by filmic conventions providing ease of adaptation, and these were used. Rather than using stream of consciousness, MacLennan relies

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Last minute touch-up before the camera rolls

on descriptions of gestures, postures, movements and illuminating passages on light to convey unsummarized feelings. In film, as Bazin has noted, we must proceed on the behaviourist proposition that outer actions reveal inner emotions. But in these days of Berne et al, complete inventories of gestures are publicized for use in hiding true states of mind. This would tend to invalidate the direct transfer of gestures from book to film.

MacLennan exhaustively details each character's past. Not only is this necessary, since his characters are acting out proof of his historical thesis, but it also provides much cherished psychological motivations which are, in effect, excuses for abdication of personal responsibility. This is practically self-parodied in the case of Marius who, in the book, is confined to a Freudian bird cage worthy of a young Hitler in its sexual allusions, oedipal overtones and inferiority complex. The book was published in 1945; consequently, this confusion of nationalism with fascism was understandable (but hardly so today despite the shrill efforts of some media people). On screen the obvious signs have been preserved – straight black hair, diminutive stature and demagogic speech – but Marius is perceived more as a parody of today's young Quebec radical than yesterday's fascist. In the book he is being manipulated by a power group, nowhere mentioned in the film.

Reliance on the past for characterization presents problems for accurately filmed adaptations. Bluestone, in **Novels into Film**, articulates the obvious: "Where the novel discourses, the film must picture." Then, importantly, he adds: "The film, by arranging externals **signs**... can lead us to infer thought." Infer is the operative word and, as illustrated by Marius, how these signs are arranged, how they lead to inferences different from what the book outlines explicitly, reveal the viewer's political biases, or the director's propagandist intentions.

Plunging into the murky waters below the surface of the film, the opening and closing sequences appear to be where Chetwynd blatantly or bleatingly propagandizes directly to the audience – something beneath MacLennan's standards For example, a World War I newsreel of conscripts heading for England opens the film. Although its scratched and grainy texture leads a documentary authenticity both to the political climate of the era that the film attempts to recreate and to the novel's historical foundation, the newsreel ends with the question: Will Quebec become another Ireland? A nice touch, rather like selling burglar alarms by quoting rising crime statistics. The question dives across the decades into the deepest fears of today's most complacent Anglophone. Just as today's Irish violence is due to problems unsolved since World War I, so could violence in Quebec erupt today. (Like all good propaganda, it emphasizes the similarities where advantageous and blurs the differences, including the centuries of long and bloody oppression of the Irish.)

Heard from off-screen is an "I hope not," a reply no doubt echoed prayerfully by the audience. The camera reverse dollies, then pans around the furnishings of the Prime Minister's office, circa 1917. It is the PM who has spoken. Tallard then, as party leader in Quebec (but not so in the novel) signs a document supporting conscription, then a contentious issue in Quebec but now just about everywhere. Since this signing leads to melodramatic complications and even his death, it seems in retrospect that political compromise was morally, if not socially, deplorable. In the book, Tallard's support of the measure was an individualistic gesture, that isolated him from his party and alienated him from his parishoners. As with industry, what he does in politics is for "the peoples' own good"; he can impose his will self-righteously – another bourgeois notion.

Political biases are again revealed in the last shot. Up to that point, the film as a whole, has elements of classical tragedy: the fall of a man of high status, the attainment of self-awareness. But as in all tragedy the line between it and irony is very fine. With the last shot, an almost high camp, political plea direct to the audience, the film leaps into the ironic camp. In a medium close-up filling the screen with widow's black, Kathleen raises her veil to reveal her tear-stained face, then recites what are apparently the lines from Rilke prefacing MacLennan's book:

> "Love consists in this,
> that two solitudes protect,
> and touch, and greet each other..."

These are fine Christian-liberal sentiments for the lovers in the audience and for the art-and-life dichotomy once torturing Rilke. But, as illustrated in Tallard's example, good bourgeois intentions and their manifestations are not adequate in the context of political oppression. Should the shot be read seriously, then it would contradict Beaubien's (or is it Jutra's?) cynical delivery during the funeral of the faith, hope and charity remedy for all evil – something the book-Beaubien would never do. Then, reading this last shot ironically amidst the tears, the film becomes consistent. This inadvertently ironic treatment of a national myth would certainly tend to undermine it. Or it would – except for Capt. John Yardley, the archetypal liberal patriarch.

Yardley seems to have stepped before the camera from the pages of the book, bringing his background, his mannerisms and the humanism which informs them all. In the pages he left only his Presbyterianism, his rudimentary level of French (today described on employment forms as "good/bien") and his wooden leg. As a stereotypical liberal, his actions serve as demonstrations of Rilke's sentiments. In the film, Yardley's wisdom derives from worldly experience. When berating his daughter Janet, then slapping her for snitching on Marius to the "press gang," he makes his political manifesto: that when at sea one had only his mates to count on, and they had only each other. (Even with all this love, we are still all at sea!) Yardley moves easily from club, to farm, to chateau; he's a playmate to all children and the social consciousness of soldiers just back from war. In the book he himself was maimed in battle, and, it can be suggested here, that the continued existence of war just might invalidate the kind of liberal humanism he stands for. To have depicted him in the film as lame would have impeded his symbolically all important ease of movement, while as a filmic sign the wooden leg would have obscured his role.

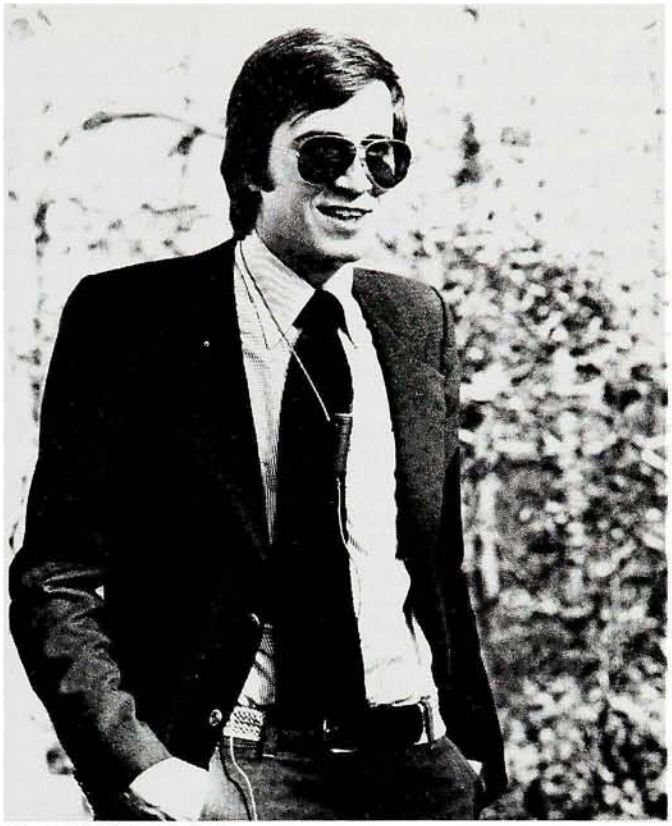

photo: Lois Siegel

James Shavick, producer

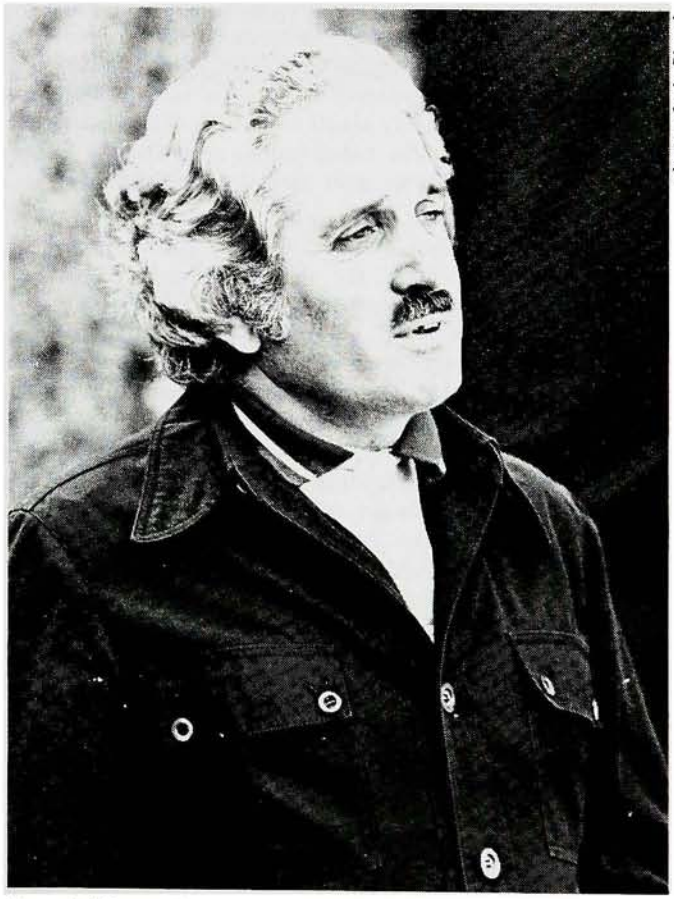

photo: Lois Siegel

Harry Gulkin, producer

Yardley's liberalism is the quality McQueen and Tallard lack. Unlike them, as a result, Yardley moves from one solitude to the other, mediates between them, and because of his good intentions is as much at home in one as the other – a virtual impossibility then as it is now. Of all characters in the film he fares the best. The socio-political inference to be drawn seems to be that the two solitudes would dissolve if only we followed his example or listened to those amongst us who most resemble him – more political advice. As in the book, he is lovable; this in a political atmosphere of oppression is dangerous indeed.

In the tendency to irony and the obvious directoral didactism in Yardley's example, the film demonstrates a political flip-flop, over dignified if called dialectic. The drama, as mentioned earlier, is one of adaptation. In contrast to the film, the book is consistent in its liberal-humanistic bias.

Further ambiguity is raised by the characterization of McQueen. In a narrative context he is unbelievable; Keach plays him flat, opaque in the manner preferred by Brecht. There is no adequately explained reason for McQueen to do what he does. The viewer can attribute McQueen's evil to sheer villainy or can rationalize it by thinking that that is the usual behavior of capitalist, war profiteers, with Presbyterian purity and insidious ambitions – the portrait MacLennan drew with venom.

But attempts in the film to add psychological complexity by having McQueen talk with his mother's portrait are embarrassing to watch. They seem to have been taken from MacKenzie King's diaries and are the adaptive overkill of what MacLennan mentions only as the mother-inspired drive to succeed, typical of many power-hungry men. But when McQueen, his back to us as it often is, is dictating a memo and wheels around in his chair to face the camera (is he staring at us?) and says all managers at the new factory will speak English, his grin is purely sinister and only that. This lack of depth in character, this caricature to rival George Grocz's cartoons, is generally an asset rather than a liability when Brechtian politicization is the aim. In accepting McQueen's inadequately explained actions, in being forced to subconsciously rationalize them, the viewer becomes aware of the politics filtering his/her own perceptions – in this case what Marcuse calls internalized capitalist aggression, hardly part of the novel. This world view perpetuates and imposes itself not only in the mind, but in political oppression, not the least of which is the oppression of the Quebecois.

Much the same can be said of the cardinal's characterization. His association with McQueen, as they conspire behind Tallard's back (and always off-screen) to squeeze him out of the factory, is more than business. Both are caricatures, both are visually scarred, and the cardinal's resemblance to cinema's rogue's gallery of caped vampires is no mere coincidence. At moments he even resembles portraits of Richelieu, whose Machiavellian machinations differ from the cardinal's only in magnitude, not in kind.

This reading of history – that Quebec's current political climate is due to the evolution of a capitalist-church conspiracy for power – is as much in agreement with the novel as with a similar thesis proposed in Robin Spry's film **Action**. What is implicit, it seems, is that the little guy has no personal responsibility in all this, an issue demolished with a much smaller budget and more consistent form and style in Michel Brault's **Les Ordres**.

Form can work against political and emotional preconceptions (as Godard so well illustrates), because it can be considered part of the political context in which a cultural artifact must be viewed. Like so many Canadian novelists, MacLennan indulges in landscape sketches for, as another myth would have it, survival on the land has shaped the Canadian consciousness. Dollying and crane shots might be analogous to long descriptive passages and they abound in the film. The camera glides and sweeps through space with the fluidity of a Guy Lafleur, ending frequently in cuts to close-ups emotionally equivalent to a slapshot. One 360 pan of the cardinal's office extends time, builds suspense and calls attention to the ascetic furnishings, hardly in keeping with his underlying greed. Several times the camera rises to conclude a sequence, diminishing the foreground characters in relation to the landscape. At other times it zig-zags from the sky like a falling leaf. These movements appear gratuitous, working against the content and are excessive demonstrations of technical virtuosity. To use Brecht's phrase, the audience is either "distanced" or turned off.

The many close-ups are obtrusive, too. Conventionally, they encourage indentification and are intended to reveal deep, emotional insights. Thus, they might be expected to represent the lyrical moments scattered throughout the novel. However, these are frequently forbidding close-ups of caricatures, and how can one identify with a caricature, except by being one, by being moved by the same forces that move the character? We may identify with Yardley, but even Tallard, in one close-up during the hunt, resembles more a male fashion model from Holt Renfrew, than a tragic figure. Again, so to speak, inadvertent irony has reared its head. This is especially obvious in the two-shot close-ups of Kathleen and Tallard, when she tells him she loves him – now that he's taking her out of the country after eight years. This shot is intercut three times, each time from a slightly different angle. She is manifestly insincere throughout, her open eyes staring past him to some off-screen space. Although her insincerity is incompatible with the film portrait, it does reflect her frustration and the ensuing affair laid out in the novel.

Bazin has written of the "environment of a film." The environment around **Two Solitudes** is created by its big budget, its setting in the past, and its immediacy owing to the existing political climate. Moreover, its source was a classic, Canadian novel. Such an environment would create an ex-

TWO SOLITUDES

d. Lionel Chetwynd, **asst. d.** Mirelle Goulet, **sc.** Lionel Chetwynd, **adapt.** adapted from Hugh MacLennan's novel, **ph.** René Verzier, **ed.** Ralph Brunjes, cfc, **sd. mix** David Appleby, Gary Bourgeois, **sd. ed.** Ken Heeley-Ray, **sd. rec.** Richard Lightstone, **a.d.** Vianney Gauthier, **m.** composed by Maurice Jarre, **m.d.** Maurice Jarre, **cost.** Louise Jobin, **l.p.** Stacy Keach, Jean-Pierre Aumont, Gloria Carlin, Chris Wiggins, Mary Pirie, Claude Jutra, Raymond Cloutier, Jean-Louis Roux, Budd Knapp, **exec. p.** David Perlmutter, Paul Berman, A. Michael Gilbert, **p.** Harry Gulkin, James Shavick, **assoc. p.** Mychele Boudrias, **p.c.** Two Solitudes Film Corporation, **(year)** 1978, **col.** 35mm, **running time** 117 min., **dist.** New World-Mutual Pictures of Canada.

pectancy for at least a melodrama with political overtones, or, at most, a political drama with the power of **Sacco and Vanzetti** (which also used newsreel footage). But when Father Beaubien drives Tallard from the church, then switches into French (without subtitles) it is an unequivocal "distancing device" not used in the novel but cinematically and probably most effective in those places where they say, "Quebec? Let her go." The simple environment is thus transformed, and the film proclaims its alignment with more radical films in which cause and effect, pathos and comedy, are rejected as playthings of the bourgeois cinema.

Some aspects common to anti-bourgeois cinema have been tentatively identified, or, more precisely, imposed upon the film through a narrow reading of it. These include distinctly separate tableaux, the caricatures, the gratuitous distancing camera movements and use of language. We could go on, searching in chaos for order. All this is mitigated against by the environment of the film, and by the portrayal of Yardley and its overbearing faithfullness to the book.

If **Two Solitudes** seems to be a film unable to make up its mind, and if it hasn't created a third solitude in its audience, then it is not being too generous to say that the uncertainty it expresses is a fair reflection of the English Canadian, political perception.

However, since the film was based on only the first half of the novel, could it be that a sequel is in the offing? If that is the case then the capitalist poilitics of the film become very clear and the film is as much a caricature of exploitation as is McQueen. □