TWENTY

THANATOS EX MACHINA

GODARD CARESS THE DEAD

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Cars and car crashes are running themes in the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, appearing most notably during the 1960s era that produced several of the classics upon which his reputation primarily rests. His first feature, the 1960 crime romance Breathless, begins with Jean-Paul Belmondo’s anarchic antihero, Michel, stealing a car for a joyride during which he plays pop tunes on the radio, fiddles with a gun he finds in the glove compartment, cheerfully chatters to himself, and breaks the rules of commercial film by talking directly to the camera. His advice to us spectators is direct: We should go fuck ourselves if we don’t appreciate the pleasures of the everyday world as much as he and Godard evidently do.

Moments later Michel shoots a cop who chases him down the highway, initiating an association between automobiles and death that will continue in Godard films as different as My Life to Live, where the prostitute Nana dies alongside the car her psychopathic pimp has parked in front of the ironically named Restaurant des Studios; Pierrot le Fou, where the protagonists use a car for their transition from incipient social misfits to full-scale cultural outlaws; and most famously Weekend, a crash-ridden extravaganza in which the uproariously alienated main characters propel their battered convertible through a surrealistic traffic
jam caused by a deadly accident complete with shattered corpses and blood-smeared pavement.

Godard depicts this *Weekend* episode in a heroically long tracking shot whose leisurely rhythm provides a conspicuously lyrical contrast to the grotesquerie of the images on display. Attraction and repulsion vie for first place in his implicit attitude here—attraction toward the gleaming techno-possibilities of a mechanized civilization that gives us horrific road accidents and exhilarating road movies with equal munificence, and repulsion toward the money-driven forces of materialism, dehumanization, and spiritual decay of which the automobile is the most obvious symbol and ubiquitous embodiment. Godard's political sensibility deplores the metaphysical degeneration induced by the ability of late capitalist society to transform people into mind-numbed automatons. Yet his camera portrays its exanimate victims with the gentleness of one who understands and perhaps envies the escape they have made from a world