

A Guide to Virtual Death

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

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For reasons amply documented elsewhere, intelligent life on earth became extinct in the closing hours of the 20th Century. Among the clues left to us, the following schedule of a day's television programmes transmitted to an unnamed city in the northern hemisphere on December 23, 1999, offers its own intriguing insight into the origins of the disaster.

6.00 am Porno-Disco. Wake yourself up with his-and-her hard-core sex images played to a disco beat.

7.00 Weather Report. Today's expected micro-climates in the city's hotel atriums, shopping malls and office complexes. Hilton International promises an afternoon snow-shower as a Christmas appetiser.

7.15 News Round-up. What our news-makers have planned for you. Maybe a small war, a synthetic earthquake or a famine-zone! charity tie-in.

7.45 Breakfast Time. Gourmet meals to watch as you eat your diet cellulose.

8.30 Commuter Special. The rush-hour game-show. How many bottoms can you pinch, how many faces can you slap?

9.30 The Travel Show. Visit the world's greatest airports and under ground car parks.

10.30 Home-makers of Yesterday. Nostalgic scenes of old-fashioned housework. No.7 - The Vacuum Cleaner.

11.00 Office War. Long-running serial of office gang-wars.

12.00 Newsflash. The networks promise either a new serial killer or a deadly food toxin.

1.00 pm Live from Parliament. No .12—The Alcoholic MP.

1.30 The Nose-Pickers. Hygiene programme for the kiddies.

2.00 Caress Me. Soft-porn for the siesta hour.

2.30 Your Favourite Commercials. Popular demand re-runs of golden oldie TV ads.

3.00 Housewives' Choice. Rape, and how to psychologically prepare yourself.

4.00 Count-down. Game show in which contestants count backwards from one million.

5.00 Newsflash. Either an airliner crash or a bank collapse. Viewers express preference.

6.00 Today's Special. Virtual Reality TV presents 'The Kennedy Assassination.' The Virtual Reality head-set takes you to Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963. First you fire the assassin's rifle from the Book Depository window, and then you sit between Jackie and JFK in the Presidential limo as the bullet strikes. For premium subscribers only—feel the Presidential brain tissue spatter your face OR wipe Jackie's tears onto your handkerchief.

8.00 Dinner Time. More gourmet dishes to view with your evening diet-cellulose.

9.00 Science Now. Is there life after death? Micro-electrodes pick up ultra-faint impulses from long-dead brains. Relatives question the departed.

10.00 Crime-Watch. Will it be your home that is broken into tonight by the TV Crime Gang?

11.00 Today's Special. Tele-Orgasm. Virtual Reality TV takes you to an orgy. Have sex with the world's greatest movie-stars. Tonight: Marilyn Monroe and Madonna OR Warren Beatty and Tom Cruise. For premium subscribers only—experience transexualism, paedophiia, terminal syphilis, gang-rape, and bestiality (choice: German Shepherd or Golden Retriever).

1.00 am Newsflash. Tonight's surprise air-crash.

2.00 The Religious Hour. Imagine being dead. Priests and neuroscientists construct a life-like mock-up of your death.

3.00 Night-Hunter. Will the TV Rapist come through your bedroom window?

4.15 Sex for Insomniacs. Soft porn to rock you to sleep.

5.00 The Charity Hour. Game show in which Third-World contestants beg for money.
