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The Future of Food in Blade Runner 2049

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The future of food in *Blade Runner 2049*

“The future of the species is finally unearthed”: These prophetic words by Niander Wallace, head of the Wallace Corporation and demi-god-like creator of millions of next-generation Nexus 8 *replicants*, are in keeping with the ideas and imagery, whether intentional or metaphorical, which I have set down in this piece. His role as evolutionist takes the place of Dr. Eldon Tyrell, the creator of Nexus model replicants, in the original *Blade Runner*. Elements of Niander’s character and the Wallace Corporation may be comparable with current day global tech CEOs, but his menace and slow monotone prophecies are more reminiscent of Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* – the giver and taker of life. Like Kurtz, he exists in a shadowy half-lit world, walled in by what he has created, but is driven by the purity and knowledge that his replicants (slaves) will not judge and only obey. It seems no coincidence that his name recalls both *Neanderthal* and *Alfred Russell Wallace*, often referred to as the father of biogeography, who is best known for, independently of Darwin, conceiving a theory of evolution through natural selection, which became known as the Wallace effect. The theme of *evolution* is central to the film’s narrative. Here I want to explore a secondary theme within the film: that of *food and farming*, set within the context of a dystopian future, played out by humans and replicants, the ones real and the others engineered. Our food system today is also being played out by the dichotomy of foods that are considered real and foods considered to be engineered or processed. Wallace’s role as the current father of bioengineering and creator of a new generation of replicants who are “more human than human” echoes today’s corporation-led drive to engineer our planet’s food to be stronger, more resistant, predictable and functional.

The science fiction genre has always been a hotbed for questions about the existence of life and what it means to be human. Food, like water and oxygen, is necessary to sustain life, but also is a key indicator of culture. One of the things that fascinate us about science fiction is how an imagined future culture might look. Food, like fashion, music, transport or architecture plays a role, usually a functionalist one, in building the scenes needed for us to understand and relate to the narrative. Many films and books of the genre depict food as some sort of reconstituted gloop: tasteless, bland, and solely for sustenance. Food is regularly presented in a similarly functional fashion within non-futuristic film tropes concerning military scenarios, regimental industrial canteens, oilrigs, prisons, compounds and even schools; this can be true not only in film but in reality also. Food in science fiction is rarely, if ever, homely or reminiscent of what we know and cherish. Like the other elements of these often distorted future scenarios, it is bleak and dehumanised. *Star Trek* gave us food that could be magically

beamed into existence upon request, whereas *Star Wars* depicted alien gloop and bugs, blue Bantha milk and, more recently, [self-creating green bread](#). Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984* both portray food as miserable, grey, stratified, and isolated from joy or comfort. Perhaps most famously of all, *Soylent Green*, a film far ahead of its time, depicts a world in which an over-populated planet mainly survives on a dubious plankton-based high-energy supplement produced and controlled by the Soylent Corporation (which paradoxically inspired the name of Rob Rhinehart's liquid nutrition of the same [name](#)). A darker cannibalistic revelation later emerges and elicits the horror that food can be in science fiction.

Governments, the WHO, scientists and giant agri-food companies repeatedly tell us that by 2050 the population will stand at 9 billion, and that effective solutions are needed to meet this challenge. Many argue that there is no way back, that we have passed a point of no return with our food system. The imagined world of 2049 is an exaggerated one, but it is worryingly similar. Too many people live in cities, disconnected from how to produce and even prepare food. Our solution has been to dramatically alter agriculture and create a globalised food system. Processed food and eating food outside of the home is normal. Mechanisation, free trade and large-scale production have created convenient versions of the foods that people were used to. This was touted as progress, and we accepted it because we had no other option, and at first, we liked it. Now a daily battle between eating healthy, ethical, authentic and safe food on the one hand and on the other consuming food we know little about, nor about the long-term implications it might have on our health, is standard operating procedure for most globalised nations.

In *Blade Runner 2049*, like its predecessor, the downtown streets have a charged atmosphere, lit by incessant buzzing neon, cluttered with trash, and fuelled by noodle vendors, exotic bars, crammed souk-like markets and booze. We see a weirdly familiar scene of people choosing food by tapping touchscreen images of their choice and consuming it on the filthy streets in the never-ending acid rain of a Los Angeles ravaged by total environmental destruction. This, of course, is not the main theme in either film, but it does sets a tone for the city's relationship to food. However, it is through more subtle and clever representations that Denis Villeneuve, the film's director, shows us the evolution of food in a destroyed world set 32 years from today. In one of the opening scenes, the audience sees a vast grey agricultural landscape that draws comparisons of [industrial-scale farming](#) on the planet today. The protagonist of the film, LAPD officer KD9-3.7, flies across this area en route to a small farming compound located within this hydroponic hellscape. He is spotted by a large figure inside one of the greenhouses. The figure

is wearing a large hermetically sealed protective suit for working – not unlike those worn by workers today while spraying vast monocultures with highly poisonous pesticides – and is surrounded by toxic swampy pools of algae in which large wriggling grubs are reared.

When officer ‘K’ lands close by, we are confronted with an ominous dead tree reminiscent of a Greek statue and a reminder of the past glory of the earth. (Later in the scene he finds what appears to be a real flower placed at the foot of the tree, the emotional significance of which subsequently becomes clear). He enters the compound; the camera focuses through a dark room, and we see steam rising from an old black pot on a gas stove, a throwback to how we cook today. The act of cooking is symbolic here for its connection to humans, as cooking is the one thing that truly distinguishes us from other mammals, having been attributed to our rapid evolution and capacity for intelligent cognisance. The protected figure, now aware of the arrival of someone to his compound, showers the toxins off his suit and removes it. As he, too, enters the compound, the dark boiling pot becomes a focus point once again. K and this enormous man speak; the tension is high. His name is Sapper Morton. He suspects the visit has some intended malice and, in an initial futile denial of any wrongdoing, he proclaims calmly that he is a farmer and nothing more. The word farmer is loaded with meaning and for most of us, it symbolises an individual grounded in some sort of food production. We trust farmers, we want them to be people, not faceless corporations, who are guardians of the environment and traditions, as well as taking care with what we will eventually ingest. Our romantic notion of farms and farmers is a nostalgic distortion of the truth, but it is cleverly used here to extract an emotional connection from the viewer towards this imposing and mysterious individual. After all, he is a farmer and just doing his job. K asks him what it is that he farms, and Sapper shows him some of the large wriggling grubs, “for protein,” he replies. This clearly references the contemporary push towards alternative sources of protein for our rapidly expanding population, with the spotlight fixed on both the damaging effects of livestock production and on the growing trend of insects as a protein source.

“What’s in the pot?” K asks.

“Garlic. I grow that for *myself*,” Sapper tells him, his voice almost sad and relenting.

“Garlic?” K inquires curiously. “Is that what I smell?”

We are only a few minutes into the film, and Villeneuve has already shown us a world where trees do not live, farming constitutes growing maggots in slimy toxic pools as a source of protein, and the protagonist does not know what garlic is or how it smells. K and Sapper are

replicants, but we view them as human; their emotional responses override our knowledge that they are programmed. For the protagonist to have no knowledge of garlic underpins the world the film inhabits, as well as hinting at society's disconnect with ingredients and farming today. The fact that Sapper grows and cooks garlic for himself suggests an evolution or advancement from an engineered towards a more natural being. Interpretations from an interview with the original *Blade Runner* director, Ridley Scott, suggest that this compound is inspired by a white cottage from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and that Sapper represents the theme of the migrant working family, forced to live in desperate circumstances while producing food in California. His altruistic nature plays out in the rest of the scene, echoing the dynamics in Steinbeck's novel.

Villeneuve also commissioned three short prequel pieces to *Blade Runner 2049* based around central themes within the plot. Not only do these serve as appetisers to the main event, they also reveal further insights of how the film's timeline progressed from the year 2019 in the original to the 2049 of this latest instalment. They are not essential to understanding the film, but they do add depth to the plot and some of the characters. In a chilling scene from one of these prequels, Niander Wallace reveals that "humanity has only survived this long by crushing the earth to suit its needs". Another razor-sharp piece of script addresses the controversial topic of food patents and intellectual property rights, where again, the blind but all-seeing Wallace coldly states: "You remember hunger, so you indulge the reckless whose patents keep that hunger at bay. I believe in life, in fact I have wrung more life from our earth than ever before. But it is dying, you [humans] are dying, which brings us to our present concern". Food is central to life and can be a far more effective way of controlling humans than using violence. In times of plenty, society tends to accept much of the trappings of governance, whereas in times of food scarcity, this can be the spark that leads to social unrest over many other social injustices. The Arab Spring is testament to this. "Every leap of civilisation was built off the back of slaves," is Wallace's answer to the world's problems, referring to his unique ability to create a functioning slave labour force, which incidentally cuts a little too close to the bone, in the light of modern day [slavery](#) within our [food system](#). Is Villeneuve asking us to recognise that if we want to continue on our current path of farming and food production, the slavery of people (and animals) will be necessary?

As with the original *Blade Runner*, the environment contributes to the narrative, and rain is a constant, except that in 2049, storms and snow now also permeate Los Angeles. A gigantic steel wall protects the city from the dark lifeless ocean, another reminder of the broken

environment. Pollution, overcrowding, wastelands and sweatshops full of orphans removing nickel from old electronics for use on the off-world (where life is civilised) quite accurately depict the capitalistic gains and consumption values seen all over our world today. The film is grim and offers very little in the way of colour or hope; the sun does not shine but is metaphorically represented through dense smog by the lights from drones and flying vehicles. Brown, black, ochre and grey are omnipresent. The soundtrack is crushing and loud. There are three brief mental respites from this carnage and interestingly, two of them revolve around food. In one we see a stunning forested scene with lush green foliage and a healthy buzz of insects. This leads into a poignant scene of children surrounding a birthday cake, creating memories for the future. In an earlier scene, K 'cooks' (a symbol of his humanity) a meal of edible translucent sustenance at his apartment. Joi, a hologram companion with whom he shares his time and emotions, instead joyfully presents him with a plate of colourful and appetising meat and vegetables, after the two play out an old-fashioned homestead scenario, where she is calling from the kitchen that dinner is almost ready, while he fixes them both a drink. Like Joi, the plate of food is also a hologram, which she has prepared and superimposes over K's actual bowl of sustenance. It is an emotional moment in the film. She is mimicking human affection, and projecting meaning and normality into both of their 'lives'. The audience can connect with this plate of food, and its comforting familiarity helps us to rationalise their unnatural bond.

The one great message of hope within the film comes when our protagonist travels past the outer limits of Los Angeles in search of Deckard, the main Blade Runner from the original film, who fled into hiding 30 years earlier. He lands at another haunted and deserted cityscape. The monitors inside his police vehicle have picked up signs of life. He has no idea what it is, but needs to investigate. As he reaches the concourse of a building surrounded by massive collapsed statues of women, a bee lands on his hand. He stares at it unknowingly as it flies away. Looking around and moving through the ochre haze and dust, he discovers a collection of very active bee hives and honey. It is not clear what the bees are surviving on; what appears to be a liquid sugar source is intermingled in the shot. The hives are a rare symbolic moment of purity within the film. They suggest the essentialness and fragility of life on the planet through their stewardship of our ecosystems and food chain. Bees and honey were powerful representations of the soul or of angels in many ancient cultures. They also represented wisdom, virtue and had a deity or oracle-like significance. In Virgil's *Georgics*, a Latin poem based on agricultural themes and written in 29BC, bees are prominently featured as a model of human society. We don't expect to see a thriving colony of hives in the middle of this collapsed

civilisation, yet they exist, perhaps only to serve as a metaphorical reference of the ancient ritual of *bugonia*, or the spontaneous rebirth of bees (*life*) from the carcass of the decaying ox (*the dead world in Blade Runner 2049*). The single picked flower placed at the foot of the dead tree, the existence of bees and the growing of garlic have subversive connotations in this sterile, controlled land and add to the realisation that a revolution of sorts is growing. The bee colony may also be a play on the health of the 'off-world' colonies, which are mentioned in both *Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049* as a place of hope and regeneration where the human race still thrives.

The sense of this new discovery is expertly crafted as K leans slowly forward and places his hand inside the bottom of one hive. When he takes it out again, it is covered in live bees. K is surrounded by destruction and abandonment, yet at the same time is shown holding, quite literally, the key to a healthy human civilisation. Villeneuve is reminding us about the frightening phenomenon of bee colony collapse worldwide. If we cannot find a solution, there will be a lot more than honey at stake. This juxtaposed moment is closely followed by a poignant, if more subtle one. K enters a building, which turns out to be a casino. Standing in a silent room, left as it was when deserted, he stares at a roulette table, and slowly leans forward once again, this time to spin the wheel. A gamble for civilisation.

It starts to become clear that this abandoned city is Las Vegas and also that someone must be here, as K has encountered booby traps in the building. He announces his presence by striking a key on a piano, which echoes throughout. A dog suddenly appears, standing still staring at him, breathing. Then Deckard makes his presence known. A voice from the shadows quotes Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*: "You mightn't happen to have a piece of cheese about you, now, [would you boy]?" It is a surreal moment in an already surreal film. Deckard is nervous as he emerges into view, yet almost mockingly says that he misses toasted cheese, and that he *dreams of cheese* nearly every night (a humorous nod towards to the original novel on which *Blade Runner* was loosely based, *Do androids dream of electric sheep?*). The Louis Stevenson quote suggests Deckard's marooned status in an abandoned and destroyed desert city, itself once a *Treasure Island* (or desert oasis) for the masses. But he also clearly yearns for real food after years of hiding in this deserted place. Eventually, the two drink whisky together, the dog also partaking in the *Blade Runner* motif of strong alcohol consumption. The prevalence of whisky and spirit alcohol in both films is notable, and is used both in times of confrontation and to dull emotional pain.

The original *Blade Runner* sent a shock wave through the film world; its cyber punk post-apocalyptic themes enthralled its cult following. Interspersed with the acid rain, flying cars, replicants and a maverick soundtrack were Coca-Cola neon signs, street noodles, eggs boiling vigorously in a laboratory beaker, and, of course, lots of booze. *Blade Runner 2049* is not a food film, but it indirectly portrays the direction our food system might be headed. It hints at what could happen if we continue to acquire large volumes of our food via industrial food systems controlled by corporations. This has been a constant source of debate in the food community for well over forty years. Environmental degradation, tampering with the genetic evolution of crops and animals, animal rights abuses and the disappearance of small and medium-sized farms is rarely off the tongues of academics and scientists trying to deliver tangible solutions to how we will continue as a species. It is positive to see Hollywood pick up on some of this even if it is only an underlying theme in a science fiction film.