

Everything Everywhere All at Once

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Everything Everywhere All at Once. Directed by Daniel Kwan (關家永) and Daniel Scheinert, A24, 2022.

Since premiering on March 11, 2022, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (EEAAO) crushed all critical and popular expectations by becoming, according to IGN, the most awarded film of all time, with over 150 accolades that put it far ahead of the previous winner, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. Furthermore, it was after that figure was announced that EEAAO won seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actress (Michelle Yeoh), Best Supporting Actor (Ke Huy Quan), Best Supporting Actress (Jamie Lee Curtis), and two additional honors. Moving from a small independent film into a phenomenon so global that the film seemed to be fulfilling the promise of its title, this was no small achievement for a film that defies easy explanation, analysis, or traditional linear progression. We could easily imagine somewhere out in the multiverse, a world in which a fantastical film with an almost entirely Asian-led cast, one that mashes science fiction, fantasy, surreal imagery, martial arts, and an immigrant mother-daughter emotional conflict at its heart, would be released, spend a few weeks as a curiosity, and then sink into the box office depths.



But we live in this particular reality, where the film hit a number of deep emotional chords with a wide range of viewers, not least, perhaps, because at the movie's core is an intensely widespread concern—the weight and outcomes of decision. The multiplicity of timelines featured throughout the movie all spring from individual decisions made by Evelyn Wong (Yeoh) at one time or another in her life, and, as the film demonstrates, these decisions have universe-changing consequences. All our fates touch each other, as they, and we, can be everything, everywhere, and all at once. The film is an important addition to the sf canon that involves the multiverse concept, not least because it centers on the idea of *choice* as a determinant in creating alternative timelines. Of course, the multiversal concept is not a new one in sf: the idea of infinitely overlapping and concurrent parallel worlds was brought into the modern day by Michael Moorcock in his expansive sf/fantasy cycle, taking on new imaginative life by Marvel Comics and DC Comics in their ongoing attempts to give structure to over eight decades of competing storylines, occurring recently in the anarchic nihilism of *Rick & Morty*, and lately becoming the movie buzzword of the moment with the introduction of the multiverse to the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Where EEAAO is singular is in adding an additional layer of emotional complexity these earlier instances lack, namely the presence of both regret and curiosity about one's life and the choices one makes

in determining the course of that life.

Evelyn is the stressed, un-notable matriarch of a Chinese-American immigrant family in Los Angeles, running a laundromat, having trouble relating to her depressed lesbian daughter Joy (Stephanie Hsu), and facing possible divorce from her loving-yet-frustrated husband Waymond (Quan). Like many immigrants, Evelyn exists in a liminal space between worlds (explicitly signified in the film by her and Waymond's switching—and code-switching—back and forth between Chinese and English), struggling to get by without really living (Evelyn's emotional distance from Joy and Waymond is palpable). In addition, she faces a loss of her usual taut self-control and position as director of events when the family is called to the local IRS office for a business audit. The water is rising ever up above her head, when she suddenly comes into collision with the realization that both she and the universe are bigger than she could ever have imagined. The multiverse is in existential peril because of a choice that a different Evelyn made, and the entire film follows from that individual choice. The Evelyn from what the film terms the 'Alphaverse' was a brilliant scientist who discovered a way to access unique skills from alternative selves, but in doing so she released the film's adversary Jobu Tupaki, an agent of pure chaos seeking to destroy the multiverse. In a world where multiversal media tends to focus on the weirdness or humor of superficial surface differences between worlds (look at films like *Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness* or the J.J. Abrams *Star Trek* reboot series), *EEAAO* instead examines the power of people to effect significant life-altering changes for themselves and others—though the consequences can and often are dire, the film is ultimately positive in its depiction of an empathic humanity and of the strength of familial bonds.

The intersecting and myriad timelines of the film make the plot challenging to recount; suffice it to say that Alpha Waymond makes Evelyn aware of the looming multiversal catastrophe and provides her with the technology necessary to jump universes and access skills and knowledge needed to fight Jobu—much humor, by the way, is mined from the lunatic triggers often required by verse-jumpers to obtain this knowledge. In an ironic twist that reflects the inherent power of choice, Alpha Waymond has chosen Prime Evelyn as the one best suited to stop Jobu because she has “failed” in so many other universes to live the life she wants, that she now has a surfeit of untapped potential. In the course of the film, as Evelyn moves towards her ultimate confrontation with Jobu, we watch her experience a number of variant lives, many of which contribute to her defensive arsenal of skills—a mystical kung fu master, an international film star (both of these, of course, being riffs on Yeoh's real-life career), a sign spinner for a restaurant, a singer, the loving domestic partner of IRS agent Deirdre (Curtis) in a world where everyone has hotdog fingers, a chef, and even a rock existing alongside Rock Jobu in a moment of calmness and peace on a lifeless Earth. Many of these lives provide Prime Evelyn with cinematically exciting things like fighting abilities, but along the course of her journey these alternate worlds give her moments of emotional wisdom that help her to realize her true empathic self. This is the self that will save the universe from the chaos she brought into being—the film turns on the revelation that the superpowered, reality-manipulating Jobu is, in fact, Alpha Joy (Hsu), who had been pushed by her

mother to explore the multiverse and whose mind became hopelessly fractured by the infinitude of possibilities.

Jobu's appeal to existential despair causes Prime Evelyn to waver in her course, to lash out at the people in her various lives and to nearly join Jobu in the latter's plan to end everything and finally bring peace. But before the multiverse can collapse, Prime Evelyn takes to her heart the voice of Waymond, who combats Jobu's bleak nihilism with a cry from the heart—across multiple lifetimes—to human goodness and love. In the film's pivotal scene, two Waymonds make that argument (the first one to Film Actor Evelyn, the second to Prime Evelyn and the verse-jumpers seeking to take her and Jobu down) in an alternating chorus:

Alternate Waymond: When I choose to see the good side of things, I'm not being naive. It is strategic and necessary. It's how I've learned to survive through everything.

Prime Waymond: I don't know. The only thing I do know... is that we have to be kind. Please... be kind... especially when we don't know what's going on.

The appeal to empathy works, and Prime Evelyn makes her final choice, to embrace Jobu with caring and kindness and to fight for the connections between people that unite us as human beings. In her final exchange in the film with Joy, she says:

Maybe it's like you said. Maybe there is something out there, some new discovery that will make us feel like even smaller pieces of shit. Something that explains why you still went looking for me through all of this noise. And why, no matter what, I still want to be here with you. I will always, always, want to be here with you.

And when Joy responds: "So what? You're just gonna ignore everything else? You could be anything, anywhere. Why not go somewhere where your daughter is more than just this? Here, all we get are a few specks of time where any of this actually makes any sense", Evelyn responds simply and beautifully, "Then I will cherish these few specks of time." It is a moment of sublime connection, a quiet moment of beauty that caps a wild multiversal ride.

Everything Everywhere All at Once is a singular film in the multiversal sf subgenre in presenting the multiverse both as a learning opportunity and an arena for exploring the complex range of human emotion: from mutual mother-daughter love and frustration, to husband-wife estrangement, to daughter-father exasperation, to the fear and confusion generated by immigrants trying to cope with American government bureaucracy, to the unexpected reach and ultimate power of empathy as a refuge and safety. That all goes a long way towards explaining much of the film's popular, runaway appeal. The best genre films, like *EEAAO*, touch the heart and mind alike, and call into question our preconceptions about who and what we are and the world in which we live. They make us imagine different and better futures, whether in this universe or another.

MEDIA REVIEWS
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