
Film Review: *Everything Everywhere All At Once* by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert

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Everything Everywhere All At Once (EEAAO) is the second feature film by directors known as the “Daniels,” and it has broken numerous records since releasing in March 2022. Under distribution through indie house A24, the film was originally only given a limited run but quickly increased to a nationwide release due to popular demand – even while the movie theater business struggled to bounce back from pandemic conditions. EEAAO was recognized during awards seasons since its release, setting a high bar with upward of 300 nominations and becoming the first film to sweep the Oscars in all the “above-the-line” categories for which it was nominated: Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, Best Director, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Supporting Actress. Clearly this film has had an impact.

The “Daniels” writer/director team is made up of Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert. They met while majoring in film at Emerson College, located in Boston. For Kwan, Emerson College was just 40 minutes from where he had been born and raised by parents who are immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong. On the other hand, Scheinert was born and raised in Alabama before moving to Massachusetts. Since 2010, the duo’s initial rise to fame came from directing (as well as often appearing in) odd yet eye-catching surrealist music videos for popular musicians, such as “Turn Down For What” by DJ Snake and Lil Jon.

This film perfectly portrays a person struggling to fulfill competing demands, a concept sociologists refer to as role conflict. Evelyn Wong is constantly being pulled in different directions because of her roles and she cannot meet their demands. She is torn between her positions as a homemaker, business owner, person with their own aspirations, and as an interdimensional heroine. We see in the opening scene Evelyn prepares a meal for the family while the dinner table is scattered with paperwork related to her laundromat business. As a homemaker, she is

expected to tend to the needs of her husband, daughter, and father but her responsibilities as a business owner are making it difficult for her to fulfill those responsibilities. The consequence of this conflict is husband Waymond serving divorce paperwork to Evelyn. She is presented with a new role of an interdimensional heroine by an alternate universe version of Waymond. Her newfound role eventually comes into conflict with her role as a business owner and homemaker as she struggles to save her business at an IRS office while fighting an interdimensional villain at the same time. Despite the science fiction premise, Evelyn Wong's situation beautifully reflects the lives of women juggling their roles in daily life.

EEAAO is a multiverse-hopping, genre bending movie about realizing one's potential and choosing the life that is most authentic to oneself. While Evelyn is trying to sort out her taxes, counterparts from "the Alphaverse" start showing up in the bodies of her family and acquaintances. Alpha Waymond explains that their Evelyn discovered how to cross between parallel universes through "verse-jumping" into the bodies of counterparts by engaging in strange actions that the individual normally would never do. Unfortunately, Alpha Evelyn's zeal for pushing her daughter Joy to her fullest potential accidentally broke Joy's mind and created an irreverent entity going by Jobu Tupaki. Jobu in turn killed Alpha Evelyn. Ever since, the Alphaverse has been looking for an Evelyn that can stop Jobu from obliterating everything. Alpha Waymond has a realization that this Evelyn is the greatest failure out of every Evelyn in the multiverse, which means she actually has the most pathway connections to verse-jump into other versions of herself who succeeded in specific talents. She eventually realizes that the only way to defeat Jobu is to become like her. At first, Evelyn also falls prey to nihilism, but then Waymond's reminders to be kind breaks through the noise and allows Evelyn to engage in empathy. This empathy then allows Jobu to also turn away from nihilism and embrace community support.

The film has great strengths in showcasing how to be true to oneself, even amid chaos, while also highlighting how different personalities can create a truly supportive community. Though Evelyn is the main character, the film shows the struggles of

assimilation and intergenerational trauma through the presence of her father Gong Gong and her daughter Joy. Evelyn fears that Gong Gong will see Joy's identity as a lesbian, who is also dating a non-Asian woman, as a personal failure of Evelyn's parenting. Joy was born and raised in America, so is the most assimilated into American culture. Gong Gong is visiting but does not speak English and upholds a lot of traditional Chinese perspectives. Evelyn is in the middle, feeling pulled in multiple directions on what she should be embodying.

The trauma of assimilation bleeding into intergenerational issues is evident between Evelyn and Joy each fearing disappointing the generation that raised them. Evelyn takes refuge in universes where she did not marry Waymond, causing Joy to not exist. While at first Evelyn sees these as signs that her life would have been better if she had rejected Waymond, it turns out that what she really needed was time and space to find her true self. She realizes she loves Waymond and that he has always done what he can to support her and Joy. Once Evelyn embraces her own identity, she is able to give space and support for Joy/Jobu to make the choices that are best for her own self as well.

The movie addresses topics of roles, mental health, support systems, assimilation, but the positive messages may get lost in the absurdist aspects of the plot. I (Darron) imagine that children of immigrant parents want to share this film with their parents to show them an example of how families support the very different lives of their assimilated children. However, between scenes of characters trying to sit on a trophy to induce verse-jumping and an odd hotdog finger world, children of immigrants may be hesitant to share with a generation that may find these gags inappropriate. Despite those scenes, families should give the movie a chance!

While not explicitly stated in the film, the "Daniels" have explained that Evelyn has undiagnosed ADHD. When looking into real-life examples of a person who is constantly being distracted and/or dissociating, they came across the explanation

for undiagnosed ADHD in adults. This sparked a revelation that Kwan openly explains:

I started taking some ADHD tests. I started realizing . . . as tears were falling down my face . . . ‘Oh, no, maybe this is who I am. Maybe this is why I had such a hard time in school and still have such a hard time in my day-to-day life.’ Even without trying to put in ADHD, this movie was going to be infused with it from the very beginning. The DNA of it was all going to be there. (Kwong, Lu, and Grayson 2023)

Individuals diagnosed with ADHD as an adult may resonate with Evelyn’s journey trying to manage distractions and waves of hyperfocus while also feeling pressure from societal expectations of what an adult “should” be doing to support everyone. Overall, this movie does a wonderful job of showing how everyone embracing their own personality truly builds the strongest support network.

REFERENCES

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