

Genre's Effect in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

By Laura Gayre

Everything Everywhere All at Once, released in 2022 and co-directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, is noted for its chaotic and backward approach to conveying its message. The film's bold, exaggerated ridiculousness, unconventional genre mixing, and conscious "awareness" that it is nothing but a fiction movie initially prods its audience to consider it perhaps untrustworthy and menial. By doing so, the film atypically creates potency because it utilizes the illusion of allowing the viewer to decide to credit the movie and its message of their own accord. Through its extreme tone shifts and irony tug-of-war, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* renders itself challenging to categorize and plays with the viewer's perception of the film's purpose and integrity.

Instead of establishing itself as a merely serious film during its setup, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* connotes its first half in a highly varied manner—several different tones and genres are represented, making for a more lightweight viewing experience. The film's first half works to reflect the complexity of human relationships, encouraging pity but also laughter and confusion, prompting the viewer to giggle and whisper to the person beside them, "What?" Instead of clinging to a singular

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genre or tone, the first half of the film ventures to feature a more realistic emotional palette (though it makes use of events that are blatantly unrealistic). The opening scenes at the laundromat suggest a serious, flat tone and highlight the real-life theme of family as well as overall discontent and miscommunication, hinting at the eventual conflict between satisfaction and dissatisfaction with “the simple life,” represented by Waymond and Evelyn, respectively. However, the film quickly veers with the shot of Evelyn and Joy backed by the surveillance screen depicting Waymond’s meticulously choreographed action sequence reminiscent of a stereotypical spy movie. Already the film juxtaposes its predictable, smooth, serious tone with one that could be perceived as frivolous or messy. Therefore, the film early on incites a question in the viewer – is it an upbeat sci-fi action thriller or a grim commentary on unfulfilled couples and misunderstood daughters? With this approach, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* dictates its message without prepping the audience for any particular tone or genre – so that by the time the film arrives at the more serious scenes, like the rock universe where Jobu Tupaki introduces her pessimistic, nihilistic view on the world, the viewer is extremely discomforted because of the invasive tone switch. Since the audience is not given a definitive answer about the film’s gravity (and is rather teased with multiple genres and tones), the film’s serious moments become especially powerful and unsettling because their message is not forceful or even expected, which might make it easier to reject. This choice from Kwan and Scheinert might render the audience’s reaction more intense, thoughtful, and genuine.

To show that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is aware of itself – that it is both a film and fictional – Kwan and Scheinert

use a ripe inclusion of external pop culture references to remind the viewer that the “real world” is separate from that of the film. For example, the real-life footage from the premiere of *Crazy Rich Asians* of Michelle Yeoh (the actress who plays the role of Evelyn) included in Evelyn’s movie-star universe not only reflects a documentary-style genre but also separates real from fictional, implying that there is a world outside the theater. This choice suggests that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is aware that it is a mere fiction film in a real-life world. However, the choice to include the footage in the movie star universe (and perhaps to even include a movie star universe at all) might act to propose that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* sufficiently mirrors the real world and therefore might hold some truth. In this way, the film leaves room for two outlooks and encourages the viewer to make their own decision about the level of seriousness to perceive and accept; by avoiding forcefulness, the film renders itself more digestible and gives the viewer the illusion of choosing to trust it instead of being asked to do so.

Everything Everywhere All at Once engages in adventurous genre-mixing that can make its seriousness difficult to discern. For example, the nature of the shot that introduces Gong Gong at the laundromat references Western themes but is juxtaposed with an emotional scene where Joy attempts to reveal her sexual identity to her grandfather but is prevented from doing so by her mother, Evelyn. Additionally, the choreography and cinematography of the fight scene at the tax office between Alpha-Waymond and the police officers references Western themes, resembles a karate action film, and is backed by a high-energy video game soundtrack, but the viewer is given little guidance about whether or not the scene is ironic and mocking, or a genuine, dramatic sci-fi action sequence. Due to this,

Everything Everywhere All at Once again distorts genre and engages the viewer to form their own opinion on the film's purpose.

Furthermore, Christine Gledhill's discussion about a new perspective on film genre and the generative view applies well when considering Kwan and Scheinert's exigence. As modern young adults struggle towards the ideal balance between fulfillment from a successful, lucrative career in a capitalistic society, and satisfaction with a simple but well-spirited life, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* sets out to answer that question. Evelyn's travels throughout different universes, though portrayed comedically and action film-like, on a deeper level seek to debate heavy, abstract topics, like the definition of success. For example, Evelyn's experience in the hot-dog-finger universe acts not only superficially as comic relief but also metaphorically as a testament to the idea that humans can and perhaps should find satisfaction even in seemingly inviable situations. The hot-dog-finger universe itself hence overlaps genre and tone—it encourages viewers to laugh at its ridiculousness but incites enough other emotions for the viewer to understand that there is a deeper meaning; unexpectedly, this approach may make viewers more likely to accept the heavy message because it is so nonchalantly conveyed. Hot-dog-finger Evelyn also starkly contrasts with movie star Evelyn, who represents the most typical definition of success. The film also molds well with Gledhill's definition of a melodrama—notably by its culminating focus on sentimentalism and optimistic nihilism (the eventual self-resolution and change in mindset in the universes where Evelyn is “unsuccessful”), Evelyn and Joy's large reversal from pessimistic nihilism, and familiar moral polarity (“good guys and bad guys”) that drives the sci-fi action plot of the film.

Melodramatically, the second half of the film slowly connotes its message as sincere.

The warping of genre in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* makes for an unconventional approach to answering familiar questions – the definition of success, the challenges of family, etc. Though the film ends on a feel-good note, it follows a confusing, uncomfortable, ironic journey to arrive there. The film leaves much about its opinion unsaid until late in the film, urging its audience to form their own opinion before they are asked to feel a certain way. *Everything Everywhere All at Once*'s absurd, surprising, and backward method forces it into the spotlight as an example of stellar generic creativity.

WORKS CITED

Everything Everywhere All at Once. Directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, IAC Films, 2022.