

“Boomers and Zoomers” battle for the fate of the multiverse in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

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Written and directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert

Co-written and directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert (known together as “Daniels”), *Everything Everywhere All at Once* takes the popular idea of a “multiverse”—a traversable group of parallel universes with small or big differences—and uses it as a loose metaphor for the hyper-connectivity of the Information Age, as well as the mutability of the human personality.

There are a lot of multiverse movies about superheroes, but this one concerns recognizable people grappling with real economic and cultural problems. Interesting!

The Wangs are a discontented family who live above a laundromat that they also own and operate, somewhere in the US. The story begins with middle-aged Evelyn Wang (Michele Yeoh) vexedly sorting huge piles of receipts in a small, claustrophobic apartment cluttered with bags of laundry, while her husband Waymond (Ke Huy Quan), a thin man with a kind smile wearing a fanny pack, playfully tries to get her attention... in order to serve her divorce papers. But now is not a good time—the laundromat is threatened with repossession! Evelyn is preparing for a meeting at the IRS office to try to save the family business.

That’s not all. Evelyn’s father Gong Gong (James Hong), who shows signs of dementia and doesn’t speak English, has recently moved in with them due to unfortunate circumstances, having arrived directly from China, and needs constant care. Evelyn is also trying to conceal from Gong Gong the fact that her and Waymond’s American-born, 20-something-year-old daughter Joy (Stephanie Hsu) has a girlfriend, Becky (Tallie Medel). This deeply upsets Joy, causing a major

argument.

“If I have to think of one more thing today my head will explode!” exclaims Evelyn in the elevator of the IRS building. But at this moment a version of Waymond from another universe intercepts Evelyn and informs her, “You’re living your worst you!”

As this “Alpha Waymond” equips her to “jump” between universes (by downloading an app on her phone!), Evelyn’s life flashes before her eyes, beginning humorously with a first-person view of her birth and the doctor telling a young Gong Gong, “It’s a girl. I’m sorry.”

In a very effective, dream-like montage we see brief glimpses of Evelyn’s stern upbringing in China, her meeting Waymond as a child at school, the two of them as young adults making the risky decision to move to the United States, Gong Gong disowning her for leaving, her disappointment upon arriving in America and seeing the meager laundromat and apartment, the birth of Joy, unreturned calls home to China, Joy as a teenager yelling at Evelyn, long days tending to the laundromat, Gong Gong arriving in ill health from China...

Alpha Waymond explains that in the Alphaverse (“the first universe to make contact with the others”), Alpha Evelyn was a brilliant scientist who developed a way to ‘temporarily link your consciousness to another version of yourself, accessing all their memories, their skills, even their emotions.’ Their daughter Alpha Joy became the most advanced “verse jumper,” but “her overloaded mind fractured. Now, her mind experiences every world, every possibility, at the same exact time. Commanding the infinite knowledge and power of the multiverse, now she’s seen too much, lost any sense of

morality or belief in objective truth.”

This crazed, super-powerful version of Joy, known as Jobu Tupaki, is on a rampage across the multiverse and is murdering all the Evelyns. The “Alpha Jumpers,” led by Alpha Gong Gong, are on a mission to restore order to the multiverse and “put things back the way they were,” but this means killing Joy “to give Jobu one less universe to access.”

To defeat Jobu and save Joy, Evelyn must harness her own untapped potential by mastering verse jumping. “You have so many dreams you never followed,” as Alpha Waymond explains, and “every failure branched off as a success for another Evelyn in another life.” But will she “fracture” her own mind in the process?

As the film’s title suggests, there’s a lot going on here. Some of it is on target.

The cast is terrific. The lively, complex and sympathetic depiction of a Chinese-American family, and the decision to include mixed Chinese and English dialogue throughout the film, is especially welcome amid the daily torrent of anti-China propaganda in the American media. Jamie Lee Curtis is also very funny and effective as the ambivalent IRS agent Dierdre Beaubierdre.

Despite the cartoonish, “kung fu” action style, the many scenes in which the Wangs are pursued by or even fired upon by armed police, security guards, and even vigilantes, and in particular Waymond’s desperate pleas to stop the fighting, sharply evoke the daily brutality of American life.

The presentation of multiverse/Internet as deeply contradictory and changeable is correct in general terms. Vast knowledge from beyond our own experience now floods in without pause all night and day. As Jobu/Joy puts it, “Not a single moment will go by without the other universes screaming for your attention. Never fully there. Just a lifetime of fractured moments, contradictions and confusion.”

But what is not broached by the filmmakers is any hope of actually making rational sense of these “fractured moments” as parts of a single social process. A sense of being overwhelmed by events and processes pervades the work.

The very fact that people all over the world can now communicate and collaborate instantly and directly with one another strongly suggests—indeed,

“screams”—that a new and more advanced form of social organization is certainly achievable, one that doesn’t produce the widespread misery and even medieval horrors which increasingly plague capitalist society everywhere.

What we get instead is Evelyn’s development of a sort of “kindness kung fu,” which infuses her newfound verse-jumping skills with Waymond’s silly kindness in place of Joy’s cynicism and despair, allowing her to demobilize her violent enemies by solving their individual problems. It’s a nice thought, but in reality sticking a “googly eye” to your forehead will not stop a hail of bullets, and neither can individual acts of kindness (or tolerance) solve a profound social crisis.

With its occasional quirks and missteps, and its blind spots, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is bursting with creative energy and compassion, and undoubtedly argues persuasively for—and *embodies* in its restlessness and confident hyperactivity—the almost unlimited potential in the technology humanity has developed, and in humanity itself.



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