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4-29-2022

Movie Review: Everything Everywhere All at Once

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Abstract

"[This movie] takes on tough questions and may yield some valuable answers."

Posting about the movie *Everything Everywhere All at Once* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Keywords

In All Things, movie review, Everything Everywhere All at Once, Dan Kwan, Daniel Scheinert

Disciplines

American Film Studies

Comments

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Movie Review: *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

Tom Clark

April 29, 2022

Title: *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

Written & Directed by: Dan Kwan and Daniel Scheinert

Starring: Michelle Yeoh, Stephanie Hsu, Jamie Lee Curtis, and Ke Huy Quan

I like movies. And it takes a unique cinema experience for me to follow up the watching with a formal reflection and review of the film within days after seeing it. Similarly, because *In All Things* doesn't consistently review films as they are released, reviews here tend to indicate a relevance to the film. This could be because the film is particularly important, excellent, or that the review may serve to draw attention to a film that might otherwise be overlooked. Perhaps if someone had reviewed A24's previous film, *The Green Knight*, it might have received more interest than it garnered last year. While that film was a slow, meditative film about virtue, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is a fascinating, action-packed exploration of whether the post-modern age has anything to offer contra nihilism. I left the theater wanting to discuss its ideas more than any other movie in recent years.

On the surface the plot is more reminiscent of a Marvel film. Here Michelle Yeoh's character Evelyn, a regular wife, mother, and laundromat owner, is contacted by an alternate version of her husband while she is audited at the IRS. Through this connection she begins to acquire superpowers as she learns that she must save the multiverse of parallel worlds from collapsing into a black hole created by another multiverse-hopping villain. Evelyn's heroic quest comedically sits in tension with her everyday life in her own world. If the film only functioned on this level, its plot would be not too different from the Disney+ series *Loki*. Though it would be simultaneously aligned with the genre of crass, R-rated, superhero films best exemplified by *Deadpool*. To be clear, the R-rating is appropriate and may rightly turn away some viewers. The levity is welcome as the film does explore weighty philosophical questions and was occasionally hilarious – e.g., the *ratatouille* inspired universe with a racoon chef. However, the surrealism in some cases varied from odd to gross. I think the film could have explored other ways to deliver the needed shock from reality and been the better for it.

Nevertheless, under the surface of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* lies a deep reflection on the meaning of life. Around Evelyn orbits a business that is in hock to the IRS, a father who is continually disappointed with her life choices, a marriage that has become stagnant, and a daughter whose life is diverging from her expectations. These relationships are key to Evelyn's

identity, and all are in distress. Few films attempt to address dominant themes among the immigrant experience, such as the difficulties of disapproving parents, the tedium of work, and the pressure to please often felt acutely in Asian families, but this film explores all of them! *Everything Everywhere All at Once* brilliantly concretizes these abstract emotional crises by elevating them to a role in saving the world. Only by addressing and resolving Evelyn's struggles with her failing business, her lack of approval from her father, her lifeless marriage, and her disconnection from her own daughter, can Evelyn hope to save the world from destruction. This microcosm/macrocosm framing is executed here at a level rivaling that of *The Lord of the Rings* or *Return of the Jedi*.

In the end, the question of what can be done against such reckless hate is answered simply and beautifully – it is kindness. It is the well-lived life of “laundry and taxes”. It is not great deeds of violence that are needed to save the world, but rather familial presence. Pay attention to the climactic scene where Evelyn ascends the staircase and *disarms* her foes not by violence, instead she redirects their disordered passions to fruition.

While not for everyone, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is the most interesting philosophical action movie since *The Matrix*. It takes on tough questions and may yield some valuable answers. It shined in its redemptive moments, highlighting the virtue of a deeply incarnational presence lived in the simple life. While it deals a deathblow to nihilism, it is, however, in the end post-modern. The meaning is created from within the imminent frame, without an appeal to a transcendent reality. The crisis is conquered through community and an incarnational act of kindness. However, one wonders whether even richer community is sufficient for human flourishing. Indeed, “laundry and taxes” may defeat nihilism here, but more is needed to defeat death itself.