

Everywhere All at Once: Justifying Neurodivergence and Age in Action Cinema

Benjamin Lewis

As a whole, 2022's *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (EEAAO) was an absolute bombshell of a blockbuster. With a sweep of the Academy Awards, the triumphant return of former child actor Ke Huy Quan to the silver screen, and an inventive take on the pop-culture zeitgeist of our time, that being the multiverse, the film would be notable just for the metatextual narratives revolving around it. Yet never does the film lose itself, despite the reverence it has for lead actress Michelle Yeoh's filmography or the freneticism of its direction. Rather, the metanarratives—the tales within the creation of this film—improve upon the story told. Through juxtaposition of its characters and the actors who play them, EEAAO provides an optimistic and hopeful perspective on Hong Kong-style martial arts cinema via Waymond (Quan) and Evelyn's age and immigrant status, as well as Evelyn's undiagnosed ADHD. Through the intersectionality of these two protagonists, EEAAO shows a future action cinema scene where, specifically, neurodivergence and age can be accepted and celebrated.

EEAAO's relationship with neurodivergence is a fascinating anecdote as well as an example of how the real world impacts the themes of the film and lives of its characters. The story goes that Dan Kwan and Daniel Scheinert—colloquially known as “The Daniels”—went into the creation of EEAAO wanting “to make a movie about chaos” (qtd. in Nguyen), a vision that is well-represented in the editing style of the film. Evelyn's experience with her mind being jerked around the infinite multiverse and thus being unable to summon the attention for mundane tasks such as her and Waymond's meeting with the tax auditor. That

specific segment of the film drew the eye of many people who have experience with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, otherwise known as ADHD. Namely, though these people couldn't claim to have the capability to interface with the minds of alternate selves, they could recognize immediately that Evelyn's predicament at the office—as well as some background clues, like Waymond's explanation of Evelyn's confusion of work and recreational expenses (Kwan and Scheibert)—were telltale signs of ADHD. They were not the first to see this comparison: initial concerns about treating Evelyn's potential neurodivergence well on-screen had prompted the Daniels to do their own research. Before long, Kwan had found such resonance between his own experiences and the symptoms list that led him to think “Oh, my god, I think I have ADHD” (qtd. in Nguyen). The portrayed symptoms were so exact that it unintentionally led one of the writers to realize their own neurodivergence.

The impact of this revelation had profound effects on the direction of the movie itself. Through Kwan's response to Nguyen bringing up the ADHD link as well as the people who feel seen by the portrayal of neurodivergence, he not only offers some words of explanation and comfort, but simultaneously a key factor of Evelyn's character: the intersectionality of her identities as an immigrant as well as a woman. He says, “it makes sense if you do have ADHD and weren't diagnosed because Asian immigrants don't care about that stuff...also, women historically have been way underdiagnosed because they weren't expressing their ADHD in the same way that men were or boys were” (qtd. in Nguyen). This interaction between minority identities is the crux of what Crenshaw coined as intersectionality—the idea that “many of our social justice problems like racism and sexism are often overlapping, creating multiple levels of social injustice.” This is what Kwan proposes to Nguyen as an explanation for her own lack of diagnosis, as well as conveniently allegorical for Evelyn's experiences. Evelyn's experiences mark onto that proposal almost exactly: a first-generation immigrant woman who constantly disappointed her father and never had the time to get diagnosed or even the knowledge to know she needed diagnosis. She had already been dealt a bad hand that would compound over time until she risks being audited at the start of the film. Under this

reading of the film, Evelyn's affinity for verse-jumping takes on alternative meaning. Early on, her confusion and distress are palpable, with the lack of structure and chaos in her new worldview all but paralyzing her until she has to act.

Not only does Kwan identify with the idea that stability is essential for neurodivergent people and that in the absence of it "we fall apart" (qtd. In Nguyen), but the early frustration of being unable to activate the trigger to initiate a jump falls within the paradigms of neurodivergent adults at college according to an article by Shmulsky, where neurodivergent students possess a centralized, overpowering sense of their own weakness and a readiness to disclose those weaknesses (36). However, upon cracking the proverbial code to verse-jumping, Evelyn becomes a formidable combatant and easy improviser, mirroring the skills that neurodivergent individuals had claimed for themselves: "hyperfocus, attention to detail, good memory, and creativity." (Shmulsky 36). Each of these skills are expressed in Yeoh's many action scenes: a single-minded determination to get through to her daughter reads as hyperfocus, good memory and attention to detail factoring in with a split-second decision to verse jump into hot dog finger-world to gain expert foot mobility, and creativity in just about every sort of combat she participates in, though special mention goes out to pulling on a blind alternate self in order to learn to maneuver and fight without vision. Despite the intersectionality of her identities as a woman and as an immigrant, she leverages her neurodivergence into powerful strengths despite the weaknesses which are shown in the forefront.

Another example of the Daniels's lives informing the form of the movie arises in Evelyn's status as a mother to an adult child. Kwan is quick to point out that the matriarch in an Asian-American or Asian immigrant household is "a gravity...because they're the ones who are holding it all together." This recognition of that strength is part of why the movie became, in Kwan's words, "a movie about our moms" (qtd. In Nguyen). Although the strength of motherhood is a powerful one and a main driving force behind the plot of EEAO, Hong Kong action cinema has a more common and archetypal female character in what Yip calls "the Woman Warrior Figure" (82). Defined as "powerful women who fight men as equals", characters such as

Michelle Yeoh's Yu Xiulian exercise "independence not often associated with women" (Yip 82).

In yet another example of real life informing the plot, Yeoh's own past playing those roles proves Evelyn a combination of those two powerful female archetypes: the mother and the woman warrior figure. In her very first successful verse-jump, the universe where she is a movie star makes heavy use of real-life footage of Yeoh's own career (Kwan and Scheinert). This is more than a reference and homage to Yeoh's past: Evelyn is portrayed *as* Yeoh, and the Evelyn of the universe we follow for most of the plot becomes Yeoh as well through living out those alternate experiences and gaining her hard-earned skills. Thus, the woman warrior figure and the gravitational matriarch synthesize into one character.

Unfortunately, despite the apparent breach of gender barriers proposed by the mere thought of the woman warrior figure, Yip also identifies "contradictory meanings that both reflect and help shape the contesting gender discourses in society" which exist within these female characters (82). These characters have a rough time existing and reading as more than female copies of male martial arts heroes without "replicating the dominant norms of masculinity and thus turning them into a stable origin or foundation" (Yip 86). In this regard, Evelyn falls somewhat into these trappings, though not for long. Alpha Waymond acts as a mentor early in the movie, explaining the mechanisms of the film's science fiction elements as well as the backstory of antagonist Jobu Tupaki (Stephanie Hsu), the alternate universe version of Evelyn's daughter Joy. He acts as a reliable ally in Evelyn's time of need and as an object of her affection, juxtaposed with the mild-mannered Waymond of her universe. A common stumbling point of any attempt to read the Hong Kong-style woman warrior figure as a progressive icon is the concern of if they can maintain agency over the course of their film. Such a place is where 1967's *The Golden Swallow*, where the titular female protagonist is reduced "to an essential but passive narrative figure—a figure to be fought over rather than one who fights" (Yip 85). With chaos as emphasized as it is within this film, Evelyn is caught off guard for most of it, needing to be pulled back in by Alpha Waymond. Once he dies at Tupaki's hand, the movie hits its darkest hour, with Evelyn nearly succumbing to the pull of nihilism and Tupaki's

Everything Bagel. Within this theoretical framework, Evelyn's own agency has been tied to Alpha Waymond and the removal of his character from the story leaves her aimless.

Waymond is what ends up pulling Evelyn back from the brink as well, though not in a combative manner. Through his optimism and altruism in the face of the cold, unforgiving multiverse, he finds joy in the mundanities and silly parts of life, as well as his love with Evelyn—expressing joy for every part of their relationship, even the “laundry and taxes” (Kwan and Scheibert). From that same framework, he imparts agency back into Evelyn through his philosophy. Though love and agency seem to be at odds when considering the possible characterization of the woman warrior figure, Evelyn's own experiences as a wife and mother lets love empower her. In this way, the intersection of her identity as a mother and as an Asian immigrant are an asset: they drive her to fight through the crowd to save her Joy.

Evelyn's status as a mother also implies and enforces another part of her characterization, that being age. While Hollywood actors traditionally age very well, Michelle Yeoh is 60 years old, and has been acting in movies for nearly 40 years. Ke Huy Quan started acting 40 years ago as well, though stopped for a time as he got older before deciding to return in 2018 following a showing of *Crazy Rich Asians* (Neumann). Although their actual ages are not directly stated in the film, Joy being an adult confirms that Evelyn and Waymond could be anywhere from mid-forties to mid-sixties in years.

The traditional action film—and the physicality required to participate in a Hong Kong-style flick—is not so kind to that age and the potential frailty it brings with it. According to Evans, the 1980s style hard-body action movie—the kind characterized by the heavily built and martial arts-trained leading actors—was “no genre for old men” (26). While obvious muscle mass would not contribute to the themes of EEAAO, the physical component of Hong Kong action cinema does mirror said requirements. Hong Kong's signature style of action emphasizes “the graceful sensuality of bodily movement”, though not to the detriment of the violence-focused elements (Tasker qtd. in Yip). EEAAO spares no focus on the physical exactitudes of its characters when it comes to action scenes: Even Alpha

Gong Gong comes equipped with a robot suit to make his action scenes possible. In a genre such as the martial arts movie, the focus is always on the skill of the practitioner, allowing them to overcome enemies through more than raw strength. Compared to contemporary action films that also draw from Hong Kong style cinema such as *John Wick* (2014), where as much time is dedicated to showing the protagonist being worn down by the constant conflict around him and thus exacerbates his retirement, there is no such limitation shown to Evelyn, Waymond, or any of the verse-jumpers. In short, age is not something that directly informs the conflict, in defiance of reboots for hard-body action films with a propensity to display “ageless aging” (Evans 33). Where the common action movie starring an actor who made their start in the 80s would focus, at least in part, on them growing past their own failing body to prove they are every bit as capable as they once were, Yeoh and Quan's history is significant not in what they used to accomplish, but in informing the audience of their characters via metanarratives.

While technically true that Quan was acting in action cinema in the 80s, his more notable roles were in *The Goonies* (1985) and his debut in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) in child roles. Following these, every role he was offered was for Asian stereotype characters, leading him to retire from acting from age 13 until his role in EEAAO (Neumann). While he would remain around the action movie scene in various roles for some time after, it is undeniable the effect that prejudice and stereotypes had upon a promising actor. Even then, Quan's own optimism could beat through the emotional pigeonhole which Hollywood had tried to square him into: his return was the result of *Crazy Rich Asians* and the film's success convincing him that Hollywood had changed for the better (Neumann). Although the movie seems to initially cast Waymond in a similarly narrow character, simply aged up as the owner of a laundromat, the early scenes of Alpha Waymond and the bittersweet melancholy of CEO Waymond display the range Quan possesses. In the context of Quan's own experiences, Waymond's skill and universe-mending optimism serve as an allegory for his own story: A man with strength and skill no one expects and never once grows jaded over his disadvantageous position.

This is ultimately the point that Kwan and Scheinert make with EEAAO: the power of optimism in the face of a cold, unloving universe. Through the lens of intersectionality, as well as compared to every alternate universe in which there is a version of Evelyn, the one the film follows is one against stacked odds. Just as much as there are many universes where Evelyn succeeds despite her compound status as a neurodivergent immigrant mother, the one that is hers is the one where she never fully could, trying to run a business rarely populated by much other than Asian immigrants, struggling with letting her daughter grow into her own person, and misfiling taxes and nearly being arrested by the IRS. Waymond is the key to all of this: a character in the same boat, one who has “been on this earth just as many days as [Evelyn]” (Kwan and Scheinert). Through Waymond, we see an appreciation for smaller things yet no less the drive to save the multiverse and his and Evelyn’s daughter compared to this movie’s female lead. Despite the situation of the world and their lives, their jobs, who disapproves of them and who wants to put them down, Evelyn and Waymond always have a choice: they can embrace “the nihilism bagel” and with it the crushing weight of all of reality upon one person or they can accept its opposite, the googly eye, the ability to see humor and love when there seems to be none (Neumann).

To say that Kwan and Scheinert put their all into this film is an understatement. Everyone put their all into

this movie—the writers and directors, yes, but the actors as well. Michelle Yeoh’s celebrated past is reflected in Evelyn’s movie star reality and brings with it a powerful feminine force which modern action films and martial arts movies cannot compare to. Ke Huy Quan’s experiences struggling to find a place in the film industry past the stereotypes and not behind a camera informs the proposed method of struggle against a reality that gives no handouts, that being one of optimism and happiness despite infinite universal indifference. Kwan and Scheinert brought a love and respect for action movies and their own mothers and decided to merge the ideas together, creating a character who fights for love, not competing with others for affections but seeks to lift her own daughter away from suicidal nihilism. Quan specifically brings a lifetime of experiences with neurodivergence that informs the plot as well as becomes a vital tool in Evelyn’s struggles. Together, the creators crafted an impassioned argument against succumbing to the pressure of life and society. The intersectionality of Evelyn places her at a disadvantage from the start, but she makes the choice not to let that hopelessness consume her. In these recent years of increasing civil unrest and uncertainty, humanity could learn a thing or two from her.

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