

Evelyn Wang saves the multiverse

***Everything Everywhere All At Once* reveals that on the other side of finitude is chaos—and love.**

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [June 15, 2022](#) issue



PARALLEL WORLDS: In order to save every iteration of the universe from an evil force, Evelyn (Michelle Yeoh) must tap into the strength of all possible versions of herself. (Photo © David Bornfriend / A24)

“You are the very least talented possible version of yourself,” Alpha Waymond (Ke Huy Quan) says to Evelyn (Michelle Yeoh) in between fight sequences with a maniacal IRS agent (Jamie Lee Curtis) in the wild, beautiful, enthralling film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (directed by Dan Kwan and Daniel Scheinert). This is hardly a flattering assessment, but it matches Evelyn’s sense of her own life. She is a

middle-aged Chinese woman who finds her husband mildly infuriating, her adult daughter mildly disappointing, and her father pretty demanding. She is running a failing laundromat and failing at a string of half-hearted hobbies she has fraudulently claimed as businesses on her taxes. While she has doubts about her life, she never imagined that every single “what if”—every unchosen path, from a breakfast dish not eaten to a marriage proposal not accepted—has generated an alternate universe in which a different version of herself has maximized potentials untapped and paths not taken.

Alpha Waymond is another version of Evelyn’s husband from a parallel universe. He has shown up in this universe to convince Evelyn that she is the key to stopping an evil force that threatens to destroy all the infinite universes that exist. It is perhaps, he explains, because of her general lack of talent in this universe that she might be capable of harnessing the power needed to save all universes. He teaches her how to tap into the skills and expertise of her alternate selves. Evelyn is in turns terrified, amazed, and intoxicated to discover just how much power she has cultivated in other lives and what it feels like to embody it.

But it is not just concrete skills she borrows from her other selves; she also gets their memories and the ability to slip with her current consciousness into those other lives. Alpha Waymond warns that it is dangerous to spend too much time living in those what-ifs. But it is Evelyn’s determination to face them down that makes the movie such a brilliant exploration of the multiverse device.

The multiverse—the idea that parallel universes exist contemporaneously with and potentially accessible through our own—has been a mainstay in science fiction and fantasy stories for a hundred years at least. You may have, like me, first encountered it in C. S. Lewis’s *Narnia*, where that parallel world allows the Pevensie children and the reader to get a fresh perspective on the Christian salvation story by seeing it enacted in alternate form. And if your local cinema isn’t playing *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, it will almost certainly have devoted several screens to *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (directed by Sam Raimi), the Marvel Cinematic Universe’s headfirst plunge into the multiverse idea.

Part of the fun of the multiverse idea is to play with the laws of physics. What would it be like to live in a world where animals could talk (*Narnia*) or our souls took the form of animals (as in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* novels) or our bodies were made of paint or rearranged themselves like Rubik’s Cubes (*Dr. Strange*). *Everything*

Everywhere All at Once has some fun with this too—a clumsy child’s painting spawns a world where everyone has hot dogs for fingers, and there is some messy, joyful fun imagining life under those physical laws.

But the movie has even more fun playing with different visual styles and film genres to frame the different versions of Evelyn’s life—from softly lit, moody romance to gothic fantasy to martial arts montage to family drama and situational comedy. It is like we are watching Evelyn move from one film to another—the scenes, lighting, camera angles, and costumes all changing on a dime—as she scrambles to learn the lines of the lead actor in a different movie each time.

As she moves from world to world, she brings all these possibilities with her. She is entranced by her other lives—not just because they suggest that she could have been a glamorous movie star or martial arts expert or lifesaving scientist instead of a laundromat owner, but because she would also have had a different inner life, with different feelings and experiences, different priorities and self-knowledge. This awareness sets up the core conflict of the film: What does it mean to choose the version of the life you are living at the expense of all the other what-ifs?

In other words, the metaphysical and moral quandary is the always bittersweet and sometimes devastating awareness of finitude. The other side of finitude is not fulfillment, it turns out, but the utter chaos of never choosing anything at all—because when faced with infinite possibility, how would one ever choose?

In another kind of movie—maybe one with a superhero at its center and not a menopausal mom worn thin by her kid’s side eye and her father’s chiding disappointment—the solution might be exerting some singular force of character to stabilize the metaphysical vortex. But for Evelyn, the solution lies in the messy, annoying, funny, and disappointing entanglements of love that comprise everyday life.

Even as it moves toward this morally serious denouement, the film never abandons its wild verve and visual enchantment. It has been a long time since I’ve seen a movie that both transported me so fully out of my mundane life and made me want to hug my kids and call my mom and appreciate my spouse’s penchant for corny jokes—in this life, or in any others that might be out there.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Life and love in the multiverse.”