

I Feel Therefore I am: Connection Through the Senses in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022)

Everything Everywhere All at Once, directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert (2022; hereafter *EEAO*), does not ask for your attention; it demands it. A film seemingly about taxes and a failing laundromat business, *EEAO*, utilizes editing to challenge viewers into becoming active participants by promoting intellectual and sensory engagement. On the contrary, theorists such as Susan Sontag pose that “interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art” (Sontag 2). She argues for a purely sensory experience that preserves art’s form rather than reduces it to content. *EEAO*’s methodical editing, influenced by the multiverse genre, deliberately induces sensory overload to compel interpretation rather than suppress it. Throughout this paper, I will argue that the film’s fusion of editing with emotional storytelling challenges Sontag’s critiques in “Against Interpretation” by demonstrating how in modern filmmaking, interpretation and sensory experience are not opposing forces but rather converging currents that create meaning. In doing so, the film supports Jason Coe’s argument in “Everything Everywhere All at Once and the Intimate Public of Asian American Cinema,” that the film creates an ongoing dialogue about Asian American identity, using the multiverse genre to mirror the complexities of the ever changing self-definition of identity.

Sontag’s argument against interpretation is seeded in an outdated critique which equates interpretation with translation. She states that in modern times “[i]nterpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs ‘behind’ the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one,” as opposed to interpretation of the past, which built on the original meanings of the text (Sontag 4). In other words, interpretation stands as a threat to the art’s form, manipulating the original meaning, and its use “makes art manageable, comfortable,” taking away from its ability to evoke

an authentic emotional response (Sontag 5). This critique argues that focus on film's form will enhance the viewer's appreciation without destroying the original meaning. When examined closely, this argument also mirrors how the process of domesticating or labeling something unknown can reduce the original evoked emotion. Just like when Professor Keeling no longer felt as scared of the mysterious bug in their garage after they labeled it, Sontag would argue that in interpreting a film, the viewer loses the power which existed in its ambiguity (Keeling). If so, then interpreting *EEAO*'s editing, should not be able to contribute to the film's themes surrounding fragmentation of Asian American identity. Alas overwhelming the audience to the point where they *have* to name the bug, the audience identifies broader themes, deriving meaning from the sensory experience. The deeper meanings of identity and connection are felt first, then understood, not the other way around.

Several scenes in *EEAO* create a fully immersive experience for the audience, such as the insert of dramatic title cards paired with a sudden change in the score, but the chaos of the film is undeniably present in the scene featuring a close-up of Evelyn's face cycling through the multiverse. This scene utilizes rapid match cut editing to completely overwhelm the viewer visually paired with a constant buzzing score, but it also provides a crucial representation of Evelyn's internal emotions throughout the film. If Sontag were to view this scene, she might equate her confusion with appreciating the art of the alternating images of Michelle Yeoh in other universes where she's an alien, a cook, an urn, and even a tree. However stopping there would do a disservice to the deeper meaning that the Daniels are attempting to convey. I see how Sontag's argument could be applied when *mise-en-scène* can be passively examined and experienced as a still painting, but the match cutting scene unavoidably confronts the viewer to

dig underneath the visual complexity of the editing to fully enter into Evelyn's internal struggle with her identity.

EEAAO's form thus directly prompts the audience to interpret meaning whilst causing them to empathize with Evelyn and consider the broader themes of development of Asian American identities. In his article, Jason Coe establishes how the multiverse genre allows Evelyn to advance her own narrative and form her identity by absorbing the lessons she learned from other universes to aid her in "saving the multiverse" (Coe 40). He also compares this to "code switching... a resource for adapting to, resisting, or even asserting power" (Coe 39). This way, the rapid editing between different versions of Evelyn is a direct representation of how she "must constantly shift between linguistic and cultural spaces," causing her to feel a dissonance between her true identity and the alternative paths she could have chosen (Coe 39). On a wider scale, the multiverse genre then connects with the Asian American community, creating an "intimate public..." where the sensory overload creates a mutual overwhelming feeling: "a subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history and their ongoing attachment and actions" (Berlant qtd. in Coe 41). Thus, the intentional use of match cut editing needs to be read into, as it reveals how code switching to gain power can be emotionally overwhelming, inevitably complicating Evelyn's security in her identity, something a wider audience can resonate with.

In fact, even when the editing slows down, the undeniable contrast invites viewers to once again question how the form works in unison with interpretation to create art. In other words, interpretation is crucial to the emotional resolution of the film. The last sequence where Evelyn confronts and reconciles with Joy, journeying through the multiverse back into reality, the escalating music heightens toward a breaking point after which the film swaps to handheld framing, shot/ reverse-shot editing, and close-ups. This dramatic shift in the film's form cannot

be fully appreciated without considering why, after a film includes sausage fingers, a lesbian version Jamie Lee Curtis, intentional papercuts, anal plugs, fighting the IRS, a singing rice cooker, literally everything and anything to overstimulate the viewer, suddenly decides to isolate the characters from the boundless absurdity of existence. How is it not appropriate to ask, why, a film about the infinite possibilities of the universe, about quick cuts and sudden dramatic sounds, suddenly gives up those conventions?

It is precisely the curiosity behind those questions that solidifies *Everything Everywhere All at Once*'s meaning. This confrontation between mother and daughter is shot strategically to position viewers back within reality because now, only after “‘imagining otherwise,’ ... free[ing] oneself from habits that reinforce ideological domination by imagining alternatives,” Evelyn can learn to love like Joy (Coe 43). The divergence from the multiverse allows both the characters and the universe to take a step back and consider the work of the subdued picture and audio. This scene isolates the women against the black background and utilizes classic shot/ reverse-shot patterns to nudge the viewer into focusing on the dialogue and amplified expressions in the close-ups, similar to classical Hollywood films. After struggling to connect with Jobu Tupaki, Joy's evil counterpart, in this scene, the film returns to familiar conventions that allude to Evelyn beginning to understand Joy. *EEAO* utilizes the multiverse genre to amplify a sense of disconnection through quick editing jumps, but through the use of the familiar editing in the final sequence leading up to the emotional resolution, the Daniels solidify how “the ultimate hard that Asian American families make each other suffer is disconnection” (Coe 43). The dramatic shift from rapid editing simply demands an emotional and intellectual response from the viewer.

The final scene is not just about a personal resolution, it serves as a broader message about Asian-American families. Coe argues that “[g]enres shape a subject's sense of belonging to

a social world” by telling stories through familiar patterns that others can relate to (Coe 41). In other worlds, the editing derived from the multiverse genre mirrors the struggles of identity, whereas the final scene, resonant of the traditional happy ending, offers the audience a satisfying ending which provides an emotional resolution between Joy and Evelyn, addressing disconnection in the Asian American families and building toward the “intimate public”.

Though it is true *Everything Everywhere All at Once* has a unique form which stands on its own as “art,” denying the intentional use of this form to generate interpretation separates the film’s content as a crucial component of its meaning. Modern films such as *EEOOA*, where the story is deliberately handcrafted cut by cut, count on the audience’s critical interpretations of the form to address larger societal themes and guide them toward seeing their individual experiences embedded into the film. Perhaps in other films the art lay in the sensory experience, but the Daniels undoubtedly fuse sensory stimulation, and lack thereof, to create an emotionally rich environment where the viewer can choose to participate in the art of connection.

Everything Everywhere All at Once demonstrates how the multiverse genre generates a memorable sensory experience through quick editing and overstimulating score contrasted with slow pacing and traditional Hollywood patterns. For Sontag, interpreting this sensory experience is an insult to the art work, and even the wanting to interpret can reduce the quality of the piece for, “[i]n good films, there is always a directness that entirely frees us from the itch to interpret” (Sontag 8). To call *Everything Everywhere All at Once* a “good film” is an understatement. Its sensory experience intensifies emotional engagement and compels the audience to make sense of all the chaos, leading them right to Coe’s argument that genre conventions create an “intimate public” where society finds connection. Thus, interpretation is not about reducing art to its content, it is about feeling personally and deeply.

Works Cited

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