

Does Hong Kong Neo-Noir provide a stable anchor to the tapestry of genre in *Everything Everywhere All At Once*?

Few films have captured an audience as much as The Daniel's second feature, *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. One thing that makes this film stand out amongst the crowds is its use of shifting tones and genre hybridisation. In an interview with *Vanity Fair* (2023), Daniel Kwan- one half of The Daniels- describes the genre of the film as a "family drama, that gets interrupted by a sci-fi, that then gets co-opted by the internet [and then] swirled in a blender". However, with a film that intentionally grounds itself outside of genre conventions and expectations, how does an audience avoid getting lost amongst the overwhelming amalgamation of bright lights, dramatic dialogue, and action sequences? A surprising thread throughout the entire film is its subtle yet arresting use of Neo-Noir iconography. More specifically, *Everything Everywhere All At Once* features a landscape of visual techniques associated with and directly referenced from Hong Kongese Neo-Noir filmmakers.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW:

Everything Everywhere All At Once doesn't do this simply to overwhelm their audience. At the core of this film is a message about life. About how overwhelming it is to live in the modern age; about how living alongside the internet, it's easy to feel as if nothing matters. The Daniel's construct this neurosis by weaving the multiverse in front of the audience's eyes, hurling them through genres and experiences at lightning speed. At its heart, however, this film isn't saying that nothing matters. The Daniels, as they discuss in 2022 during an interview with *Radio Times*, imply that life is beautiful *because* nothing matters. The film approaches nihilism with positivity. If nothing matters, the audience has the freedom to decide what matters to them- *Everything Matters*.

Neo-Noir makes an interesting appearance amongst these. In the book *Film Noir and the Meaning of Life* (2006), Steven Sanders discusses the importance of moral ambiguity when classifying a film as Neo-Noir. As a genre, there are 'murky distinctions between good guys and bad guys'- there is no obvious right and wrong. He also discusses the frequent exploration of themes such as the duplicity of self, and most notably, nihilism. As discussed above, *Everything Everywhere All At Once* grapples with all of these themes; Evelyn's multifaceted nature as a Chinese immigrant (who are so often overlooked and stereotyped in media), the lack of any clear antagonist (Jobu Tupaki, Joy- Evelyn's daughter), the moral ambiguity as a result of this, and of course, it grapples with nihilism in the context of the multiverse. They also take

explicit inspiration from the prolific Hong Kongese Neo-Noir auteur, Wong Kar-Wai, who explores similar themes in his film *In the Mood for Love*. But why?

SCENE ANALYSIS:



(Left: *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. Right: *In the Mood for Love*)

Amidst the many universes that Evelyn finds herself living in, she finds herself in an alternate timeline where she, as a famous actor, and Waymond, as a successful businessman, harbour feelings for each other that they cannot pursue. This whole scene is a direct reference to the cinematography of Wong Kar-Wai. The colour grading, the shot composition, and the arc of the scene itself are all clear nods to his style as a director. Even the soundtrack shifts to a soft, romantic saxophone (a staple of jazz— a popular genre of music used in neo-noir soundtracks). In this scene, Waymond delivers his iconic line... “In another universe, I’d have loved doing laundry and taxes with you,”.

This scene takes a dramatic slowing of pace compared to the rest of the film, once more echoing a mood-ier, more philosophical neo-noir film. It allows the audience time to breathe amongst the action-packed absurdity that the rest of the film throws at them. It gives them time to digest what the film wants to say, cemented by the above line of dialogue— that despite the vastness of the universe and how overwhelming and meaningless things can feel, it’s important not to lose sight of the small things that make life meaningful. The Daniels have discussed their inspiration from Wong Kar-Wai in many contexts. In an interview with *Vulture* (2022), they explain how they wanted to lean into Wong Kar-Wai’s cinematic language which solidifies the argument that this was an intentional shift.

WIDER USE OF NEO-NOIR ICONOGRAPHY

Throughout the whole film there are constant nods and references to neo-noir iconography which solidifies the genre as a constant through-line to the film, especially in relation to Hong-Kongese Neo-Noir and more specifically, Wong Kar-Wai. The Daniels admit that at heart, this film is a family-drama but following that same thought process, so is Wong Kar-Wai’s *In the Mood For Love*. *Everything Everywhere All At Once* just uses the multiverse as a distraction. The very first frame of

the film shows the family, Evelyn and Waymond, and their daughter Joy as they sing karaoke, reflected in a circular mirror.



(Left: *Blade Runner*. Centre: *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Right: *In the Mood For Love*)

A constant throughout the neo-noir genre is the use of mirrors. Most often, they are used to communicate the complexity of human nature, the duplicity of self, and character reflection or growth. This is also the case for *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. Evelyn is reflecting on the Joy that she once had— both her daughter, and the emotion— as she starkly snaps out of it and gets back to sorting through receipts. Similarly, as we see Mrs. Chan in *In the Mood for Love* reflecting on what her feelings mean for her. The use of mirrors in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is used amply throughout the film, a constant motif that reminds both Evelyn and the audience what is important in life, in the multiverse.



(*Everything Everywhere All at Once*)

Reflected, Evelyn sees herself, her home, and Waymond. Yet in each of these scenes, Evelyn is actively shutting herself off from all three of those things. Watching a sequence play out through a reflection also increases the feeling of introspection from an audience. In an interview with Cannes in 2001, Wong Kar-Wai talks about his intention when using mirrors and internal framing. He said he wanted to create the sensation that the audience was watching over the characters, gossiping, almost (adjacent to Hong-Kong Gossip culture, he mentions it never feels safe to talk about something secret). Although this doesn't seem like the Daniel's surface intention, they mentioned using Wong Kar-Wai's 'cinematic shorthand'. In *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, rather than the feeling of peering into these character's lives the audience is met with the feeling that we're already in them. It's almost as if the character's themselves are looking at their own lives from a third person perspective. This aligns once more with themes of nihilism. When it feels like nothing matters, it's hard to feel grounded towards the things that do.

CONCLUSION

Although the central themes of *Everything Everywhere All At Once* present themselves as oppositions to the themes of Neo-Noir (i.e. nihilism vs. optimistic nihilism), the inclusion of these elements still enhances those themes and act as a grounding anchor throughout the rest of the film. Ironically the nods to this genre through things such as mirrors/reflections or the occasional slower paced dip into Wong Kar-Wai inspired scenes, allows the audience to reflect and it reminds them of what's important to the characters and in life itself. They act as a through-line to ground the audience amongst the chaos that The Daniels have created around them. The threads of neo-noir are almost acting as a representation of an individual's response to living in such a hectic, online atmosphere. The immediate nihilism, the feeling of being so small and inconsequential in the universe. Throughout the film, however, the use of this iconography is shown to shift from the aforementioned feeling, to one of compassion, of optimism. In the final scenes of the resolution, the audience sees all of this iconography meld, transforming into something positive– the colour grading and slightly slower frame rate of Wong Kar-Wai's cinematography particularly evident.

That being said, it doesn't make the other genres any less important. Without them, we don't have the point that this anchor is trying to argue. In *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, the audience are bombarded with intense action, exciting imagery, and absurdist humour. It's intentionally difficult to stay focused, it's overwhelming. It's life. For Evelyn, so much is going on that she's struggling to connect with *anything at all*. Then we have these moments throughout the film in which we see neo-noir iconography pop up. This both communicates Evelyn's struggle to find meaning, yet also *provides* the audience meaning and gives them stability. It gives them a hand in open water and allows them to create meaning for themselves– which is exactly what The Daniels were trying to say. If nothing matters, *we have the freedom to decide what matters*.

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