

**“The Universe Is So Much Bigger than You Realize”:
The Unconventional Production Design of *Everything Everywhere All At Once***

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Abstract

Production design interprets a film’s script into a stunning, immersive visual world. However, in the classical Hollywood style of production design, these settings are only supposed to convey necessary information and maintain a sense of realism for the audience. While this approach succeeds in many films, it limits the alternative styles of production design we could be seeing, and in turn limits the diversity of stories. *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, 2022) is an example of a film that innovatively subverts conventional production design expectations. The research I propose aims to show that the film’s production design successfully supports its characters and culture by including authentic details in unconventional ways such as maximalism and theatricality. By examining scholarly sources on various production design styles, primary sources from the film’s directors and art department, the content of the film itself, and the widely positive critical and public reception to the film, I hope to raise further questions about the future evolution of mainstream production design. As streaming services and movie theaters battle for viewership, it is more important than ever to understand the stories and styles that resonate with an audience.

Introduction

The director, the cinematographer, and the production designer: together, they make up the core leaders of the film production process (Whitlock 32). Directors guide the actors, cinematographers craft the camera's shots and the lighting. But what about the production designer? They are responsible for interpreting the script and transforming both its literal locations and subtextual metaphors and themes into an overall "look" (Tashiro 3; Whitlock 32). The relative realism of this look depends on the needs of the script and the director and production designer's desired style. The production designer also oversees the art department; this may include art directors, set decorators, prop departments, and visual effects artists, all of whom are responsible for overseeing, gathering, or constructing specific aspects of the sets in line with the production designer's vision (Whitlock 33).

Despite how essential the role of the production designer is, few scholarly film analysis works focus heavily on its artistry, instead discussing thematic content, industry issues, or other aspects of production (Tashiro xv). This may be due to the fact that in the classical Hollywood approach to filmmaking, a film's production design should not intrude upon its narrative: "The set needed to be visible, for it gave the viewer salient information about the characters. But once that information had been absorbed, there was no point in having the settings conspicuously visible throughout a scene" (Thompson 53). However, some filmmakers deliberately take an unconventional approach to what a film's look should and shouldn't be. By introducing multimedia, maximalism, and a degree of theatricality, these films can create more unique and more imaginative worlds.

Going against the grain of what mainstream films typically portray also makes space for a greater diversity of filmmakers and consequently a greater diversity of characters and stories.

One of these films is Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022), with production design by Jason Kisvarday and set decoration by Kelsi Ephraim. It follows Evelyn Wang, a Chinese American immigrant struggling with her relationships with her husband and daughter who suddenly gains the power to travel between parallel universes. She must master this power in order to defeat a malevolent force threatening to destroy all of these worlds, while simultaneously being audited by the IRS and managing her family troubles. I want to analyze *Everything Everywhere All At Once* specifically in order to understand how its production design influences its portrayals of characters and culture.

Related Work and Motivation

Seminal works that encompass both the conventional expectations of production design and examples of films that take a more unconventional, stylized approach include C.S. Tashiro's *Pretty Pictures: Production Design and the History Film* and Brian Henderson's "Notes on Set Design and Cinema." A few other sources go more in depth on a specific movement or director's unconventional style of design: "Expressionist Cinema—Style and Design in Film History" by Thomas Elsaesser focuses on design in German Expressionism and "Subduing the Cluttered Background: Set Design" by Kristin Thompson discusses films directed by Ernst Lubitsch. Additionally, Cathy Whitlock's *Designs on Film: A Century of Hollywood Art Direction* is also helpful in providing a historical overview of the role of the production designer and notable works throughout cinema history.

However, due to the publishing date of these sources, they all lack information on more recent technological innovations in film that affect production design such as computer generated

visual effects. They also primarily address films made by and about people of European descent, leaving out countless important voices in the film industry.

I want to apply the historical context and film analysis arguments from these sources to the more recent and more technologically relevant film *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. Interviews with the directors, production designer, and set decorator can support my analysis, as found in the articles “Everything Everywhere All At Once: The Making Of Daniels’ Multiverse Odyssey” by John Nugent, “Making of ‘Everything Everywhere All at Once’: How Directing Duo Daniels Created a Multiverse With \$14M” by Rebecca Sun, and “Complete Chaos Theory: Building the (Messy) Multiverse of ‘Everything Everywhere All At Once’” by Jennifer Wolfe. For example, production designer Kisvarday describes the maximalist approach he took to building the set of Evelyn’s chaotic apartment, saying, “We had weeks to make that feel as textured as the real-life locations we were shooting in...Usually it’s a little too perfect — the light switch is exactly where you expect it to be, not in a strange place, which is what real life normally is” (Sun). The video interviews in “Everything Everywhere All At Once (2022) | Behind the Scenes” on YouTube are also valuable primary sources.

Ultimately, the research I am proposing aims to broaden the scholarly field of production design analysis to be more reflective of current film trends and diverse stories. The production design style of *Everything Everywhere All At Once* may be considered unconventional by Hollywood standards, but its theatricality is authentic to the Chinese heritage of its main characters: “Through various manifestations of theatricality in Chinese cinema, theatre has been used to represent and question concepts of Chinese culture and the Chinese nation” (Luo 133). It is essential that stylistic perspectives from around the world are included in our understanding and appreciation of production design and the film medium as a whole.

Methods

The first step in my research involves reading and analyzing sources on historical and cultural contexts in production design. I am particularly interested in finding information on what conventional production design involves, as well as what it means to utilize unconventional production design styles. These sources will also provide me with examples of notable films in the past that have subverted traditional design expectations. Additionally, I will gather, organize, and analyze sources on the filmmakers' intent with *Everything Everywhere All At Once* as well as critical and popular reactions to the film.

Next, I will closely watch *Everything Everywhere All At Once* multiple times. I will specifically look for and take notes on the location of each scene. By studying the film one scene at a time, I will make a chart for taking notes that divides the film into scenes and a scene into props that are used and other significant set dressing that stands out. I will add information on what character these items are associated with (if any), what they are used for (if anything), and why they seem significant to me. Finally, I will also note how the color palette changes from scene to scene as color is another essential tool production design utilizes to communicate a character's point of view.

Once I have this scene breakdown and my thorough background research on production design, I will write my findings up as a research paper. By analyzing the chart I made, I can use the props and set dressing that speak the most to a character's personality and background as specific evidence to my claims in my paper.

Expected Results

I expect my research to result in an analysis paper in the film studies discipline. It will open with a section on background information on the classical Hollywood style of production design. I will then provide historical examples of films that have subverted these traditional expectations and embraced theatricality such as the German Expressionism movement in the 1910s and 1920s and the films of directors Baz Luhrmann and Pedro Almodóvar beginning in the 1990s. I will argue that *Everything Everywhere All At Once* specifically is a significant, relevant example of a film that blends theatricality into the medium of film to create its unconventionally designed world. This will be supported with evidence from the props and set dressing of notable scenes showing how the production design authentically supports the main characters, their heritage as Chinese Americans, and their character arcs.

I will also discuss the widely positive reception the production design has enjoyed both from critics and the general public, as this shows that the style is not just artistically effective but also emotionally resonant with audiences (and adds to the economic success of the film). I will end my paper by suggesting possible implications the success of *Everything Everywhere All At Once* may have on the design styles of other films going forward. By raising questions for future research, I hope to add to the field of scholarly analysis of production design in film.

Conclusion

Production design is often secondary in scholarly analyses of films, due in large part to the fact that in classical Hollywood style, it is meant to preserve realism so effectively that it becomes invisible to the audience. However, some films deliberately go against this norm and use theatrical production design to support characters that are just as rebellious, eccentric, and

revolutionary as the spaces in which they live. *Everything Everywhere All At Once* is one of these special films, and through my analysis of it I hope to demonstrate how production design can contribute to the complexity of characters, both in personality and national identity.

Works Cited

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Budget and Timeline

<i>Week #</i>	<i>Research Activities</i>	<i>Estimated Expenses</i>
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Background Research: find, read, and take notes on scholarly sources on production design styles and history 	Compensation for researcher at minimum wage of \$15/hr for 15 hours: \$225
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary Source Research: find, read or watch, and take notes on around 8 primary sources from the creators and art department of <i>Everything Everywhere All At Once (EEAAO)</i> 	Compensation for researcher at minimum wage of \$15/hr for 15 hours: \$225
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Watch <i>EEAAO</i> and create scene breakdown chart with props, set dressing, and analysis 	Compensation for researcher at minimum wage of \$15/hr for 15 hours: \$225 Purchasing <i>EEAAO</i> for streaming on Amazon Prime: \$19.99
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outline analysis paper Meet with mentor to discuss literature review findings and outline of paper 	Compensation for researcher at minimum wage of \$15/hr for 15 hours: \$225
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write the analysis paper using the outline as a guide 	Compensation for researcher at minimum wage of \$15/hr for 15 hours: \$225
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet with mentor and peers to discuss revisions for the paper Revise and proofread paper to prepare for dissemination 	Compensation for researcher at minimum wage of \$15/hr for 15 hours: \$225

Estimated Total Expenses: \$1369.99