

## **The Musical That Pretended It Wasn't a Musical: Genre and Narrative Style in *Once***

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**Abstract:** This article examines why, despite its indisputable aura of documentary realism, *Once* (John Carney, 2006) belongs in the Hollywood film musical tradition. We begin by briefly exploring the concept of genre and the shifts in the generic adscription of the film upon its release, mainly due to the need to build an audience for an extremely low-budget, foreign musical film in the difficult US market. In the following section, we look at the musical genre and describe some of its main features and subgenres. Next, we conduct a formal analysis of several scenes in the film and discuss whether and how the narrative strategies in them adhere to the conventions of the classic screen musical, especially the concern for the authenticity of the live performance and the depiction of music as community builder, tool for individual empowerment and connector of different time/reality levels.

**Keywords:** film musical; genre; John Carney; formal analysis; Irish film

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## 1. Introduction

Budgeted at only €130,000, *Once* (John Carney, 2006) was shot on HDV in Dublin with a crew of twelve over a fortnight in January 2006 and premiered at the Galway Film Fleadh in July the same year. It was there that Sundance programmer John Nein spotted it, which paved the way for the film to be selected for the 2007 Sundance Festival. Screened to rave reviews and packed, enthusiastic houses at Sundance, *Once* garnered the audience award in the World Cinema Dramatic Competition and was picked up for US distribution by Fox Searchlight. Throughout the following year, it became a sleeper hit, grossing about 10 million dollars at the US box office, and won numerous other awards, including the Academy Award for Best Original Song at the 2008 Oscars.

The film centers on the Girl (Markéta Irglova) and the Guy (Glen Hansard), two gifted but precariously employed musicians in contemporary Dublin. She, a young married Czech mother, works as a *Big Issues* trader, flower seller and domestic cleaner, and lives with her toddler daughter and mother in an old apartment on Mountjoy Square in central Dublin. He, a native Dubliner, is a childless, thirtysomething repairman who lives with his father in a Dublin suburb after being jilted by his girlfriend, and makes ends meet by busking on Grafton Street.

One evening, she stops to listen to one of his street performances and they strike up a casual conversation. The next day, she brings a broken Hoover for him to fix. They have lunch together, play and sing at a music shop, and get to know each other better. They spend the following two weeks writing and rehearsing songs, sometimes on their own and sometimes together, and meet each other's family and friends. After getting a bank loan and putting together a supporting band of local street musicians, they rent a studio for a weekend and record a two-song demo tape, with which the Guy expects to get a contract with a record company in London. On their way home from the studio, they agree to meet one last time before he leaves for the British capital, but she does not show up for the date. At the end of the film, he is shown waiting for a flight to London at Dublin Airport, while she, already reunited with her husband in her apartment, plays a piano he has bought for her.

The present article aims to see through the supposedly "real feelings [without] overlay of technique, effect or style"<sup>1</sup> so many critics fell for. Without ever denying its artistic merit and charm, we examine why *Once* is not *cinéma vérité*, but a carefully scripted, shot and edited film musical in the Hollywood tradition. More specifically, the following section explores briefly the concept of genre and the shifts in the generic adscription of the film upon its release. Next, we look at the musical genre and describe some of its main features and subgenres. In Section 4, we conduct a formal analysis of several scenes in the film and discuss whether and how the narrative strategies in them adhere to the conventions of the screen musical.

## 2. Film Marketing v. Film Criticism: From Indie Romance to Film Musical

Much has been written about the charming documentary feel of *Once* both as a cinematic text and an act of film production. Shot on the streets of Dublin with a small crew and on a short budget, *Once* certainly has a documentary feel, with hand-held and long-lens shots in real locations, shaky movement, natural light, jump cuts, home video footage, improvised dialogue and "passers-by becoming unwitting performers."<sup>2</sup> Also contributing to the impression of *cinéma vérité* is that the film was initially marketed as an indie romance in the vein of Richard Linklater's *Before* trilogy. According to John Carney, the label *musical* would have scared off young audiences, as they are not "that interested any more in everything that's set up and everything you can tell, 'This is a Hollywood movie'."<sup>3</sup>

Even though the generally massive box-office of blockbusters proves the Irish director wrong, the strategy seems natural when one comes to realize that the low production values of

50 *Once* are indeed as big a deterrent for the natural audience of the Hollywood musical as overt  
 artificiality is for that of indie films. It was unlikely that *Once* could beat American musicals  
 at their own game, so the initial marketing campaign made a virtue of necessity, put realism  
 forward as a conscious aesthetic choice and largely dropped the film musical adscription in  
 favor of vaguer labels such as indie romance—as if *realism* and *musical* could not go in the  
 55 same sentence. And maybe they cannot. As Neale points out, genres are generally assumed  
 not to “consist only of films,” but also of “specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that  
 spectators bring with them to the cinema and that interact with films themselves during the  
 course of the viewing process.”<sup>4</sup>

By labelling *Once* primarily as an indie romance, the director, producers and  
 60 distributors tried to build an audience for the film and instill in it a different set of  
 expectations than they would have for a musical and, therefore, establish “a regime of  
 verisimilitude” where the low production values and documentary *mise en scène* could be  
 considered “appropriate.”<sup>5</sup> That is, they were trying to constrain the possible ways in which it  
 was to be “interpreted, guiding [viewers] towards a *preferred reading*.”<sup>6</sup> As McQuail argues,  
 65 “the genre may be considered as a practical device for helping any mass medium to produce  
 consistently and efficiently and to relate its production to the expectations of its customers.  
 Since it is also a practical device for enabling individual media users to plan their choices, it  
 can be considered as a mechanism for ordering the relations between the two main parties to  
 mass communication.”<sup>7</sup>

70 Nevertheless, audiences, critics and the industry often differ in the labelling of films,  
 and labels can, and often do, change over time.<sup>8</sup> In fact, genres are “in a constant process of  
 negotiation and change”<sup>9</sup> and, what is more, they often “change, develop, and vary by  
 borrowing from, and overlapping with, one another.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, many films resist a  
 univocal generic adscription and hybrids abound, so clear-cut, stable canons are difficult to  
 75 establish, and the distinction between genres, sub-genres, modes, formulas and cycles can be  
 rather blurry.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of *Once*, it was critics who first unambiguously classified it as a film  
 musical. Free from any fears of alienating audiences, they instantly welcomed it as a gust of  
 fresh air in an otherwise hackneyed genre. Just to give a few examples, in contemporary  
 80 reviews it was described as “a low-budget musical;”<sup>12</sup> a film that “deconstructs” and  
 “reinvents” the film musical “as something wholly new, inspired and alive;”<sup>13</sup> “the most  
 naturalistic musical ever;”<sup>14</sup> “a musician’s musical;”<sup>15</sup> an “indie musical;”<sup>16</sup> “the most  
 naturalistic and believable romantic musical you may ever see and hear;”<sup>17</sup> a reinvention “of  
 the movie musical as a genre of swooning rock ‘n’ roll realism;”<sup>18</sup> “a heart-breaking low-fi  
 85 musical;”<sup>19</sup> and “really, truly a musical, in the best sense of the word.”<sup>20</sup> Eventually, Carney  
 himself would admit that although “musicals by their very nature are unreal and surreal,”  
*Once* could be considered “a naturalistic musical,” as “there’s nobody breaking into song and  
 no orchestras that come up from the ground. It is very much what you see is what you get.”<sup>21</sup>

Although the above reviewers, and many others, agree that *Once* is a musical, they  
 90 generally fail to account for why we should consider it so. This is only understandable given  
 the limited space that film reviews are allowed in the media, the general readership they are  
 usually aimed at and especially the rather elusive nature of genres. We, however, believe that  
 before labelling *Once*—or, for that matter, any other film—a musical, the main features of the  
 genre should be examined.

### 95 3. A Brief Definition of the Musical Genre

The musical can be defined as an “original, integrated art work intended for a  
 specifically American audience, involving both naturalistic spoken drama and some  
 combination of singing and dancing.”<sup>22</sup> Consequently, it offers the viewer “a multivalent

experience” in which “the different balance and purpose given to speech, song and dance . . . and how [they] are used and combined, define the features associated with each of the musical’s several genres or subgenres.”<sup>23</sup>

Bush Jones, Stanfield, Knapp and Sala, among many others, agree that the musical was born in the US in the late 19th century. At first, it was heavily influenced by operetta, minstrelsy, vaudeville, burlesque and extravaganza, and closely tied to the social need to cope with two disruptive social phenomena that have continued up to these days: immigration and modernization. The answer the musical gives to these shifts would be a restorative, escapist, inclusive, utopian<sup>24</sup> vision of America and American identity, “more amenable, more open, to immigrant cultures,”<sup>25</sup> despite the persistence of some Old World, patriarchal prejudices about homosexuals, women, non-whites and non-Anglo-Saxon European nationalities.<sup>26</sup>

In musicals, music and/or dance are presented as community builders and tools for individual empowerment, as ethnic minorities, gays and especially women use them to try to escape and transform the WASP, male-dominated social structures that render them powerless. It is this conflict “between a strong (generally male) ‘reality’-oriented (and thus anti-musical) presence, and a (generally female) musicals-based sensibility . . . that makes it possible for conventional films to become musicals and vice versa.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, it is this conflict of opposites that shapes the basic narrative of the musical, based on an alternation of dialogue and music scenes.

Film musicals usually climax in a successful opening night that celebrates the triumph of the show and love against all odds, at once an “Ode to Entertainment”<sup>28</sup> and—though this may be not always the case in post-studio musicals—“the coupling of the principals, whose marriage . . . both symbolizes the resolution of larger conflicts and finds resonance in the community so established.”<sup>29</sup> Also, this marriage is almost always intended to be read as a metaphor for the US by both heritage American and recent immigrant audiences.<sup>30</sup>

The larger conflicts above tend to be personified in the principals, who embody “seemingly incompatible peoples—or families, classes, races, ideas, ideologies, or whatever”<sup>31</sup> that must be reconciled at the end, as must be the tension between naturalism and dialogue, and artificiality and music. Already present in stage musicals of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the tension was exacerbated as the genre began to be transferred to the screen, where song and dance were bound to become much more artificial, sets much more naturalistic, and transitions into song and dance much less plausible.<sup>32</sup>

In the seminal *The American Film Musical*, Altman proposes that screen musicals successfully negotiate these transitions through audio and video dissolves, which allow them to connect, respectively, “the (realistic) diegetic track to the (romantic) music track” and “diegetic space of a realistic nature to an idealized space—diegetic or not—that represents its diametrical opposite.”<sup>33</sup> As a matter of fact, Altman considers the audio dissolve the main stylistic trait of film musicals, as the superimposition of sounds allows the diegetic track to constantly pass to the music track “through the intermediary of diegetic music.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, conversations can turn into orchestral accompaniment through music “performed by characters in the film rather than by the invisible instrumentalists who record the music track of other films.”<sup>35</sup>

According to Feuer and Knapp,<sup>36</sup> many narrative strategies of film musicals attempt to make up for the loss of authenticity of the live performance and communicate to the viewer a sense of organic unity between play, performers and audience that can only be truly achieved at a theater. Closely related to this is the fact that the film musical shows a much higher degree of concern for its stage predecessors and the spectator position than other cinematic genres.

Closely related to that is the fact that a great number of film musicals are actually backstage or show musicals, that is, musicals about how stage musicals or other works of art

are made, and the many obstacles writers, musicians and/or actors—i.e. the community<sup>37</sup>—  
 150 have to overcome on their way to stardom and often, though not always, love. Moreover, it is  
 not unusual for the production and opening night of successful stage musicals from the past to  
 be nostalgically—sometimes, ironically—recreated, along with the lives of the artists who  
 made them possible.<sup>38</sup> However, over the course of the narrative, the stage often extends  
 155 beyond the theater, so the main characters can break into musical numbers virtually anywhere  
 and invite bystanders to join in.<sup>39</sup> Although the bystanders always turn out to be professional  
 performers, and music usually turns the storyworld into something artificial, oneiric and/or  
 completely different, the impression these numbers aim to leave on the audience is one of  
 naturalness, spontaneity and especially continuity with traditional forms of song and dance  
 that are open to anyone. Furthermore, in yet another attempt to bridge the gap between screen  
 160 and viewer, the *mise en scène* of the climactic opening night in backstage musicals almost  
 always includes point-of-view shots from the front rows of the theater, encouraging film  
 audiences to identify with the diegetic spectators and share the experience of watching a live  
 show.

However important they are in backstage musicals, bystanders, off-theater stages and  
 165 traditional forms of song and dance are even more important in folk musicals, where  
 “professional musicians rarely appear as . . . characters.”<sup>40</sup> Apparently more open to realism  
 because of its reliance on location photography, the folk musical nevertheless romanticizes  
 small communities as havens from the sheer individualism, stark consumerism and suburban  
 cultural uniformity of (post-)modernity. In short, the folk musical nostalgically (re-)creates a  
 170 lost world of traditional, authentic communal values, “a myth to dissemble the break between  
 production and consumption, between capital and labor, between past and present” that  
 paradoxically “must be carried by the very mass media which represent its avowed enemy.”<sup>41</sup>

All in all, as a genre the musical “offers itself as the spectator’s dream, the spectator’s  
 show”<sup>42</sup> and “satisfies the spectator’s desire to escape from a humdrum day-to-day  
 175 existence.”<sup>43</sup> Consequentially, it is much more open to transgressing what Neale calls the  
 social and cultural regime of verisimilitude.<sup>44</sup>

As said before, genres involve specific systems of expectation and hypothesis. In a  
 film musical, “bursting into song is appropriate, therefore probable—therefore intelligible,  
 therefore believable.”<sup>45</sup> The film audience’s pleasure, however, derives from “repetition and  
 180 difference,”<sup>46</sup> so “each new genre film constitutes an addition to an existing generic corpus  
 and involves a selection from the repertoire of generic elements available at any one point in  
 time . . . In addition, each new genre film tends to extend this repertoire, either by adding a  
 new element or by transgressing one of the old ones.”<sup>47</sup> In Jauss’s terms,<sup>48</sup> the horizon of  
 expectations of each film genre expands and changes with every new genre film.

## 185 4. Film Musical Narrative Strategies in *Once*

### 4.1. *The Importance of Live Performance*

O’Connell argues that, even though *Once* is “not a musical in the traditional sense of  
 the word,” as in films clearly belonging to the genre, the songs and lyrics become a narrative  
 device “to convey story and plot detail, supported by the visual shifts in space and time.”<sup>49</sup>  
 190 She relates these shifts to Altman’s audio and video dissolve—themselves characteristic traits  
 of the screen musical—and the dual-focus narrative of the film to the show musical subgenre,  
 adding that

In this instance, a range of personally- and jointly-composed songs leading to an  
 ensemble recording is what links this film to the Hollywood template, yet transposed  
 195 to a local setting. Large chunks of narrative space are given over to performing whole  
 songs, unsurprisingly for the musical. However, documentary-like, many of the

performed songs are written by one or other of the main characters, not as part of the storyworld but in real life. This approach to documentary is fused with the highly conventionalized approach to musical genre.<sup>50</sup>

200 Not only do many scenes contain performances of complete songs, but most of the songs grow out of conversations. However, since the visual style is documentary, the two leads are musicians, and many songs are played on the guitar one of them carries around, the transitions are generally smooth. As a result, the music seems to be diegetic, made only with the instruments and/or by the singers on screen, and recorded simultaneously with the images.  
205 It seems, then, that what you see in *Once* is indeed very much what you get and, unlike in classic musicals, music never gets to “move in and out of the storyworlds”<sup>51</sup> and only production sound is used throughout, as Hansard and Carney would claim in promotional interviews.<sup>52</sup> Also contributing to the aura of realism is that, as often occurs in folk musicals, there are no theatrical performances and most songs are performed naturalistically on  
210 location.

That there are no theatrical performances in *Once* does not prevent it from sharing with classic musicals a concern for the authenticity of live performance, which is mostly channeled through the very Irish tradition of street busking. When the performance takes place in an open public space, the *mise en scène* recreates the point of view of an onlooker watching and recording it on a mobile device by means of third-person, hand-held, long shots with natural light—a narrative strategy that reproduces the experience of many people at live events in the early 21st century, where they spend more time looking at the screen of their smartphones than at the event itself. Moreover, rather than the best-seats-in-the-house view of classic musicals, the distance and angle from which the performances are filmed vary,  
215 passers-by and traffic often get in the way, and even the performance itself can break off at any moment.

This is already noticeable in the first scene, which looks as if it had been shot on hand-held devices by casual bystanders. *Once* opens to a close-up of a moving van. When it finishes passing by, we can see a third-person, wide shot from across the street of the Guy busking in front of Dunnes Stores, a junkie (Darren Healy) hovering about, singing, clapping and dancing to the song, traffic passing by and anonymous Dubliners glancing at both as they walk by (Figure 1). When the Guy stops playing momentarily to warn the junkie not to try to steal the donations in his guitar case, the scene cuts to a mid-shot of him from a different angle. It then returns to the wide shot and then to the mid before cutting again to a very wide  
220 shot of the street. Returning to the wide shot, the performance comes to a sudden end when the junkie unexpectedly grabs the guitar case and starts running down the street.  
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FIGURE 1. Wide shot of the Guy, the junkie and a passer-by in Grafton Street.

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#### 4.2. *Music as Community Builder*

It could be possibly argued that the song and dance by the junkie and, later, the drunkard and the Hare Krishna on Grafton Street (9:45) are ironic appropriations of the onlookers that often join the leads' performance in folk musicals. However, there is a scene later in the film that clearly appropriates this trope: the in-house party (47:55–50:42). Shot from the point of view of different guests, it presents several postmodern urbanites taking turns singing traditional Irish music. This collective pastime, in which everybody is invited to take part—including members of the cult Irish band Interference, who pass as anonymous, yet musically talented, guests to most audiences outside Ireland—nostalgically recreates the sense of authenticity and community lost in the individualism, consumerism and suburban cultural uniformity of Celtic Tiger Ireland.<sup>53</sup> Also significant in the scene is that the Girl comes to the party but never gets to sing. Instead, she remains in the background as a passive onlooker, reminding viewers of the invisibility of immigrants and immigrant cultures in contemporary Ireland, and that she does not fully belong in her adopted country yet and maybe never will, as there seems to be an invisible barrier setting her apart from the native Irish.

As said above, the tensions between different, seemingly irreconcilable, groups of people, mainly but not exclusively migrants and natives, have historically shaped the musical genre. The conflict is often embodied in two main characters, one male and the other female, whose coming together through song and/or dance aims to show that differences between peoples and the tensions that arise from them are mostly social constructs. All in all, musicals would propose that if the integration of different musical traditions and performing styles into a musical number is highly beneficial to art, so too is the assimilation of different peoples into the mainstream to American society. At the end of musicals, musical and social harmony are usually achieved through a successful opening night and the marriage of the main characters, respectively.

In *Once*, the Guy and the Girl are characterized—physically, psychologically and even spatially—in opposition to each other. The Guy is a tall, thirtysomething, native Dubliner who is single and childless, and lives with his father in a house in a suburban area of the city. The Girl is a rather short, twentysomething, Czech immigrant who is married, has one little child and lives with her mother in an apartment in central Dublin. He is also cynical and reluctant to emigrate and take risks, whereas she is a bit of a dreamer and has already taken a big risk by moving to Ireland. Even their musical backgrounds are different. He learned to play the guitar by himself and is interested in folk, country, indie and singer-songwriter music, whereas she is a pianist with a background in classical music.

It is a shared love of music that kick-starts a relationship between them, who then find in music an effective vehicle for bridging cultural difference and allowing them open up to each other. Furthermore, music allows the narrative to unfold as a rather conventional show musical, a subgenre where the formation of the protagonist couple is associated “with the creation of a work of art.”<sup>54</sup> A sort of making-of of a demo tape that may help the Guy land a contract with a London record company, the film shows the process of musical creation, the difficulties budding musicians have to overcome before being able to get a slot at a studio and how music is recorded professionally. However, rather than the successful opening night of the classic backstage musical, what the viewer gets at the end of *Once* is a recording weekend/night that, despite achieving its aim, is no guarantee of anything for the Guy's career. Neither will the couple stay together once the tape has been recorded, which certainly defies “the Hollywood and Bakhtinian approach to romance” but is not “an unfamiliar device of the musical.”<sup>55</sup> <sup>56</sup> He returns in the end to an Irish girlfriend and she to a Czech husband—a

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closing reflection on the unlikelihood of a melting pot in Ireland and, therefore, an eventual, US-like assimilation of immigrants into the Irish mainstream.<sup>57</sup>

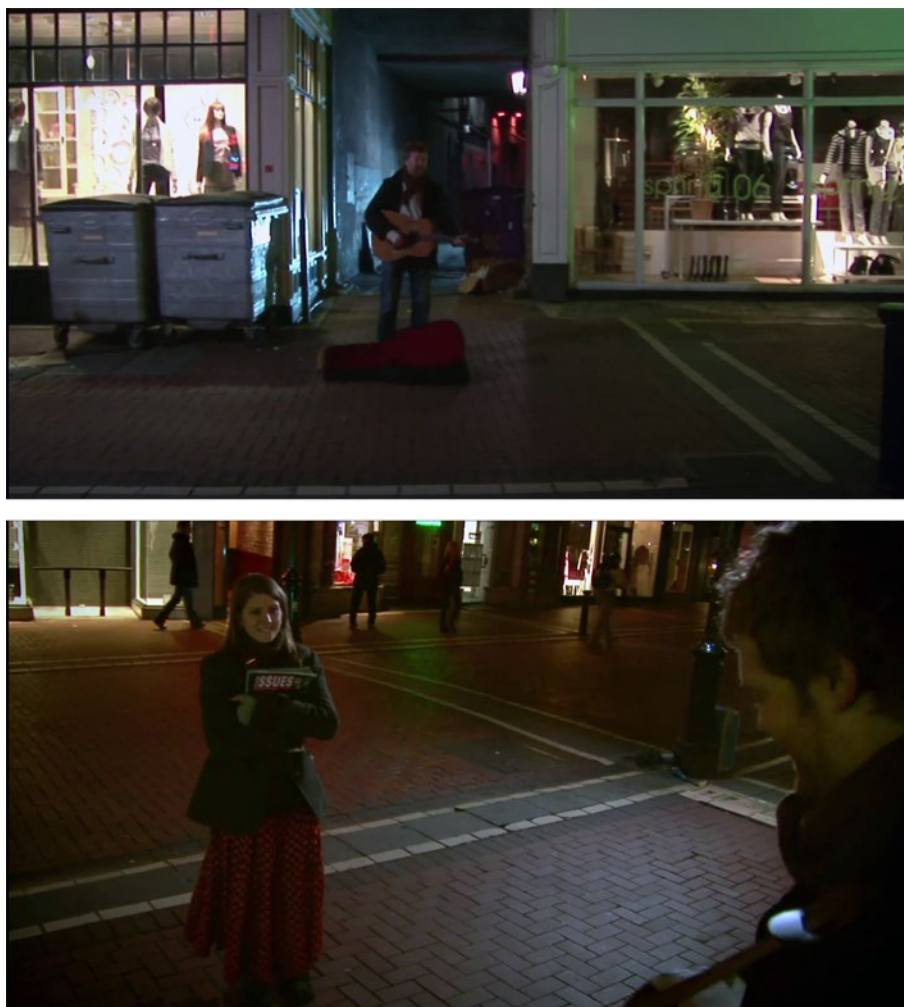
#### 285 4.3. *Music as Tool for Individual Empowerment*

In spite of the bittersweet ending, over the course of the narrative, music is shown to have the power to transform the rather bleak reality of the main characters and empower them, especially the Girl. Music gives her a voice that, unlike her accented English, blurs cultural difference, puts her on an equal footing with the native Irish, and allows her to  
290 idealize her Dublin surroundings.

That music can transform reality is first suggested in the night exterior scene where the Guy and the Girl meet each other for the first time (3:45–8:10). The scene begins with a slightly low-angle, wide shot of the Guy playing “Say It to Me Now” to an empty Grafton Street, which closes in to a mid-shot as the performance becomes more intense. When the  
295 song finishes, the camera dollies away from him to reveal that both shots were actually views from the Girl’s perspective and the street was not that empty, but music had allowed the Girl to create an idealized, unreal space inhabited only by the Guy. However, it is not only the visuals that are transformed by music, but also the soundtrack. As the camera closes in on the Guy, the ambience fades out and the diegetic music he is playing gets to fully occupy the  
300 soundtrack, highlighting the subjective character of the visuals and the fact that, regardless of Hansard and Carney’s claims, there is indeed much post-synchronized, carefully edited sound in *Once*.

Documentary realism returns to the storyworld when the song is over. A brief conversation between the Guy and the Girl follows, which is covered by conventional over-  
305 the-shoulder shots edited in shot-reverse-shot. As a consequence of the difference in height between the actors, the viewer sees her in slightly high-angle, mid and close shots, which, along with her accent, second-hand clothes, undisguised admiration for him, and references to her menial jobs and broken vacuum cleaner, create expectations of powerlessness and vulnerability about the character (Figure 2). The second encounter (9:57–25:00), however,  
310 utterly destroys these expectations to reconstruct the Girl as a highly resilient individual and gifted musician whom the Guy comes to admire and consider as a partner, musical and romantic, during the climactic scene at Waltons Music store (12:11–20:12).





315 FIGURE 2. Different point-of-view shots in the first encounter scene.

The sequence begins with them meeting again on Grafton Street. Building on the expectations created by the previous encounter, she enters the scene wearing the same clothes she was shown in the night before and towing along the broken sledge vacuum cleaner she said she would bring him to repair. However, as soon as they start conversing, the shot-reverse-shot editing and over the shoulder shots are largely abandoned in favor of the two-shot. This type of shot, which dominates the *mise en scène* for the rest of the film, allows the film to set up the relationship between the two characters, keep both in frame, show their emotional reactions, convey that neither character is more important than the other, and keep costs down, as dialogue can be filmed and edited using fewer setups and shots. Besides, it gives the viewer a sense of voyeuristic intimacy with the characters, which in *Once* is also occasionally reinforced by the use of long lenses and shots through windows.

As this encounter marks the true beginning of the friendship-cum-romance between the main characters, it feels only natural that the director switches to the two-shot, especially when we take into account the small budget he had for making the film. In line with what we have just said, the second scene in the sequence is mostly made up of two-shots—some of them, long-lens—through the window of Simon's Place Coffee Shop (Figure 3), as if someone were spying on the Guy and the Girl while they are having lunch. Furthermore, the characters are shown seated at a table, which largely neutralizes the difference in size and height between them and contributes to dispelling some of the expectations of frailty about the Girl created in the first encounter. Although these expectations will not be completely

dispelled until the climactic scene at Waltons, the dialogue in this scene also contributes to her transition into a resilient individual with her own artistic voice, as she takes the initiative in the conversation to reveal that she is so much more than a domestic cleaner or a street vendor—she is a Czech classical pianist who experienced her father’s suicide before moving to Ireland.



FIGURE 3. Shot through the window of Simon’s Place Coffee Shop.

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A lesson in film economy, the scene at the back of Waltons Music that climaxes the sequence, including the close-up inserts that highlight each character’s contribution to the performance, was entirely crafted (except for a cutaway of the shop owner) out of just two hand-held master reverse angle two-shots from each side of a display piano and plenty of camera movement (Figure 4).

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FIGURE 4. Master reverse angle two-shots for the Waltons Music scene.

- 355 The scene begins with a two-shot of the Guy standing up while the Girl sits at one of  
 the display pianos and starts playing Mendelssohn. It then cuts to a reverse two-shot that puts  
 the Girl in the foreground while the Guy recedes into the background. Next, it closes in on a  
 low-angle, mid-shot of the Guy, where the conventional meaning of the low-angle shot—i.e.,  
 power and strength—is undermined by the actor’s ecstatic, humble look as she plays the  
 360 piano. Increasingly moved as the performance progresses, he squats down beside her. The  
 camera tilts down with him, which reframes the shot to make the Girl reappear in the  
 foreground and the Guy look smaller than her. Neither the camera nor the actors move during  
 the short dialogue that follows the performance (13:50–14:03), where the inversion of roles  
 her musical skills have just brought about is furthered by his lack of knowledge of classical  
 365 music, of which he is shown to be as ignorant as she was of pop-folk in their first encounter.  
 GIRL: That kind of thing.  
 GUY: (Exhales) It's amazing. Did you write that?  
 GIRL: No, no, Mendelssohn did.  
 GUY: It's good.  
 370 GIRL: It's good, yes.

When she asks him to play her one of his songs, the scene cuts to a reverse two-shot. Then,  
 the Guy leaves the frame for a second to get a stool to sit on, which puts him at the same  
 height as her and further expresses visually what the character and the viewer have just  
 discovered: that she is his artistic equal, if not his superior.

375 As a result of the *mise en scène*, the scene works as a piece of video-recorded live performance, an intercultural dialogue between two artistic equals and especially a very intimate encounter between two individuals through the medium of music. In fact, the performance reaches an almost sexual climax in the two close-ups (Figure 5) where they sing the chorus together one last time:

380 Take this sinking boat and point it home  
 We've still got time  
 Raise your hopeful voice, you have a choice  
 You'll make it now  
 Falling slowly sing your melody  
 385 I'll sing along



FIGURE 5. Close-ups at the end of “Falling Slowly.”

390 Unlike English, which creates a barrier between immigrant and native citizens, music is shown to be a universal language that blurs the opposition and entitles the Girl to a “voice” and a “choice” in her adopted country. As Mara suggests, that this voice can be truly heard is shown to be not only beneficial to the immigrant community, but also to the native Irish, as “throughout the scene, Irglova’s accompaniment and her harmonization strengthen Hansard’s composition, creating an important moment when Dublin’s music scene integrates a new  
 395 voice.”<sup>58</sup> That is, a new (artistic) community and a better, more solid work of art are born out

of the collaborative, intimate encounter of these two seemingly different people with different musical backgrounds.

400 Right after the last chorus, a high-angle zoom out shot of the Guy and the Girl playing cuts away to the shop owner enjoying the music at the front counter. Although the scene finishes with one last two-shot of them at the back of Waltons, “Falling Slowly” continues on the soundtrack throughout the next two scenes, in which they are shown crossing George’s Street Arcade and sitting at the back of a double-decker bus, and fades out when they start talking on the bus (20:32).

#### 4.4. Music as Connector of Time/Reality Levels

405 “Falling Slowly” is not the only song that starts out as diegetic music in a scene, comes to fully occupy the soundtrack as it passes to the music track during the scene, and then continues as orchestral accompaniment in the next scene, where the characters are shown doing different things at different times and places. As a matter of fact, most of the songs in the film adhere to this pattern, which helps the narrative to transition seamlessly between  
410 scenes, between music and dialogue, between the diegetic and the music track, between location and post-synchronized sound, and between different levels of time and reality.

As said above, Hansard and Carney have claimed that *Once* relies exclusively on synchronized recorded sound and, consequently, documentary authenticity reigns supreme. The claim is, however, at best ambiguous for a number of reasons. First, although the songs  
415 are mostly performed at empty, quiet places, the *complete* absence of ambience while they are being played indicates that at least some of them must have been post-synchronized. In these scenes, the diegetic track does get “stripped of everything but the song,” but the song itself is *not* really “part of the diegetic track”—it is diegetic music that *seems* to have been recorded simultaneously with the image but is actually post-synchronized. In other words, “looked at  
420 from the point of view of source and motivation it belongs to the diegetic track, but seen from the standpoint of actual production and general effect it seems to belong to the musical track.”<sup>59</sup>

Even if the performances relied on location sound only, it is clear that to use this sound in a different scene from the one with which it was synchronically recorded, it has to be  
425 post-synchronized. In some scenes, Carney highlights the artificiality of the orchestral accompaniment by muting the diegetic track *and* explicitly breaking the synchrony between image and sound: while the soundtrack is taken up by non-diegetic music, the characters are shown conversing or even playing different songs. In other scenes, background instruments and voices are added to the songs when they pass to the music track. Finally, it should also be  
430 noted that the director resorts to a clever strategy to reuse music across scenes and keep its diegetic quality: in some other scenes, the characters record songs that are later played on an on-screen tape or CD player.

Towards the end of the film, a professionally recorded version of “When Your Mind Is Made Up” is used in two different scenes and passed off as location sound at the beginning of  
435 each. The song is first recorded at the studio for the demo tape (58:30–1:02:20) and then played on the producer’s car CD player on the post-recording, early morning trip to Dollymount (1:10:50–1:13:50). Although the synchrony between image and sound gives the impression that only location sound is used in the studio, the absence of ambience and of acoustic differences between the control and recording rooms, as well as the null effect of the  
440 level adjustments Eamon (Geoff Minogue) is shown doing, give away the use of post-synchronized sound. Then, even though the main purpose of the trip is to test the master on a car’s “shitty speakers,” when the producer turns on the player, what we get is the same high-quality version of “When Your Mind Is Made Up” heard before. However, no real attempt at concealing the unrealistic, post-synchronized nature of this sound is made this time. Once the

445 song starts playing, all other sounds are muted and the synchrony between image and sound gets broken. The characters are shown conversing in the car and then clowning around on the Dollymount Strand beach, but the only sound the viewer can hear throughout the whole scene, even when they get out of the car, is “When Your Mind Is Made Up.”

450 A greater level of complexity is attempted with the other song they record at the studio, “Fallen from the Sky” (1:02:40–1:04:20), which Carney manages to use both diegetically and extradiegetically in the same scene by cross-cutting between two montages that condense the recording and the breaks at the studio, respectively. Once more, a post-synchronized, carefully edited version of a song fully occupies the soundtrack. The illusion of location sound is, however, maintained in the few shots where the Guy and the Girl are shown  
 455 playing the instruments and singing the lyrics in synchrony with the soundtrack. All the other shots, including many of the recording itself, are characterized by an evident lack of synchrony between sound and image that clearly points in the direction of post-synchronized sound. As most songs in the film, “Fallen from the Sky” continues to the following scene, where it rather unexpectedly comes full circle and is repositioned as location sound,  
 460 supposedly coming from the on-screen mixing deck the characters have been sitting around at 4 a.m. to review the day’s musical output. Consequently, the two montages can be retroactively reinterpreted as flashbacks to the recent past and somehow related to Altman’s video dissolve, as “perhaps the most representative use of the video dissolve involves the superimposition of time levels: the diegetic present—banal, limited, ruled by necessity—is  
 465 opposed to, but fades into the distant past or future—exciting, limitless, controlled by a romanticizing memory or tendency toward dream. In one sense this usage of the technique is only an extension of Hollywood’s conventional use of the dissolve to suggest lapse of time.”<sup>60</sup> It seems hardly casual, then, that the scenes in the montages are dominated by an  
 470 overwhelming sense of joy and playfulness, quite in line with the romanticizing memory that Altman mentions and different from the atmosphere of tiredness that dominates the scene constructed as the diegetic present.

A similar use of montage and music can be found in an earlier scene, where the Guy adjusts “Lies” while watching home videos of his ex-girlfriend Catherine (Marcella Plunkett) and him in happier times (37:47–42:32). O’Connell argues that the scene operates as a music  
 475 video-cum-flashback in which “the grainy-documentary feel of the home-movie footage alongside the performance of a whole song allows the narrative to stretch the fictional potential in an interesting and innovative way.”<sup>61</sup> Paradoxically, the grainy, low-definition quality of the home footage montage, as well as the variety of places it presents, contrasts starkly with the sharpness, clearness and dullness of the DV-shot diegetic present of the  
 480 Guy’s suburban living room. This, in turn, reinforces the opposition between the happy, yet rather unreal and distant, past and the heartbroken, yet real and current, present the song connects. It should be added that, despite its diegetic appearance, “Lies” soon passes to the music track and, what is more, adds the sounds of a violin, a piano and a female voice—the  
 485 ex-girlfriend’s?—towards the end. That the song lyrics revolve around a relationship that is on the rocks and the chorus accuses the other partner of “moving too fast” and “telling / lies, lies, lies” coats the happy, playful memories on the home video footage with a layer of sour irony that further questions the objectivity of such memories.

There is at least one more scene where music is used to connect past and present. Right after his first encounter with the Girl, the Guy goes home and starts playing the bitter  
 490 “All the Way Down” in his room (8:12–10:12). Although the scene seems to be visually much simpler, Carney manages to effectively create a flashback just by inserting a close-up of an old picture of Catherine smiling and, unlike most scenes in the film, allowing other sounds to also occupy the diegetic track as “All the Way Down” passes to the music track. While the song keeps playing in the background, we see the Guy dialing a number and, after a few

495 tones, hear Catherine's voicemail greeting. The director cleverly anchors the meaning of the insert by cutting to the picture exactly when the voicemail greeting starts to run on the other side of the line. He then cuts back to the Guy as he hangs up the phone and then again to the picture, before returning to the Guy playing the song and re-establishing the initial synchrony between music and image and, therefore, the appearance of location sound. "All the Way  
500 Down" continues over the following two scenes as extradiegetic orchestral accompaniment, first to a brief interchange between the Guy and his father at the latter's repair shop, and then to a montage that sums up the Guy's morning busking on Grafton Street. As in the scenes just examined, the Guy can be seen playing different songs, although the diegetic track is muted and the only sound we hear is "All the Way Down," which once more highlights the post-  
505 synchronized nature of much of the sound in the film.

As Altman points out, the musical ascribes "radically different reality levels to the two different images which are superimposed."<sup>62</sup> In the scenes above, some shots are ascribed to the happier past the Guy is torn between getting back to and getting over, whereas some others are presented as part of his diegetic present. Rather than help him escape or transform  
510 reality, these scenes bring out the character's inner conflict by creating a series of binary oppositions between sound and image, past and present, and memory and reality that do not get solved. By allowing sound and image to operate on two different time/reality levels, the director deliberately leaves the viewer unsure about what is real and what is not in the past shown in the flashbacks: the happy, playful footage recorded and the picture taken back then  
515 or the embittered, present-day lyrics that, as if they were a voice-off, comment on them and question their veracity.

A rather similar semantic mismatch between sound and image, albeit much less ambiguous, can be found in the only scene that, according to Carney, was intentionally designed as "a direct homage to the old-school musicals:"<sup>63</sup> the exterior night scene where the  
520 Girl walks down the streets of Dublin in her pajamas, while singing aloud the lyrics she has just written for one of the Guy's unfinished songs (34:04–37:32). Composed of three lengthy tracking shots with very low-key lighting, the scene begins with an audio dissolve in which the ambience at the entrance of the convenience store where she has just bought batteries for her portable CD player is fully replaced with two post-synchronized tracks: the (diegetic)  
525 lyrics she is singing and the (largely non-diegetic) instrumental track she is supposedly listening on the player. Unreal and oneiric, the scene shows a young foreign woman in her pajamas walking alone at night, sometimes in almost total darkness, in an unsafe area of Dublin, while headlights of cars with unknown occupants keep passing her by (Figure 6). The Girl, however, remains immersed in music throughout the scene, oblivious and unafraid of her  
530 scary surroundings.



FIGURE 6. Tracking shot of the Girl walking alone at night in Dublin.

535 If this were a horror film, we could say that the character starts singing to try to allay  
 her fear and escape a terrifying reality that the score makes even more terrifying. However,  
 this is not horror, nor does the music track accentuate the sense of fear and threat expressed  
 by the visuals. Quite to the contrary, the suave, romantic music and lyrics transform the  
 diegetic north inner city into a non-threatening, tranquil, almost romantic space that the Girl  
 540 seems to be fully in control of. In other words, by raising her newfound “hopeful voice” on  
 her own for the first time, she does get to escape and transform reality and, more importantly,  
 somehow transcend the private sphere and make the streets of Dublin hers. That  
 notwithstanding, it should be also noted that she first sings at an open public space on a  
 deserted street at night—that is, at an open public space that, by its very emptiness and  
 545 darkness, becomes almost private.

The native Guy busks day and night on Grafton Street, the very commercial center of  
 Dublin, and makes some money from his talent, whereas the immigrant Girl is not that lucky.  
 The Guy may occupy a liminal position in the Irish public sphere, but this position is shown  
 to be much closer to the center than that of the Girl, who gets to sing in an open public space  
 550 only after sunset and on a dodgy, empty street where (almost) no one will listen and no money  
 can be made. During the daytime and/or in better areas of the city, she has to relegate herself  
 to being the unskilled immigrant worker Irish capitalism expects her to be. When private  
 spaces become public, she also gets pushed back, as occurs in the in-house party scene, where  
 she never gets to sing, or at the studio, where she limits herself to providing the background  
 555 piano while they are recording with the band, and only shines as a composer, piano player and  
 singer when she manages to be alone with the Guy in a dark room for a few minutes.  
 Moreover, when they jam “Falling Slowly” at Waltons, the only person who listens to her  
 performance is the owner, as the shop is closed for lunch.

Altman argues that “in the folk musical . . . woman is the source of life—the land, the  
 560 mother, the one who attracts the seed, nourishes it, helps it grow, and brings the new fruit  
 forth. We have the impression that woman alone, or nearly so, is responsible for the new  
 creation.”<sup>64</sup> The immigrant Girl may be ultimately denied a proper artistic place in the Irish  
 public sphere, but it is she who first recognizes the Guy’s composing talent and encourages  
 him to develop it. It is she who improves “Falling Slowly” and adds lyrics to another of his  
 565 unfinished tracks. It is she who breaks the deals with the studio owner and the bank manager  
 that make the recording of the professional demo tape possible and helps him convince the  
 street musicians to participate in the recording. And it is also she who ultimately provides the  
 drive for him to go to London and try to get his girlfriend back.



570 The successful recording of the demo tape climaxes the show musical subplot, but the film only achieves full narrative closure right before the end credits, when the Guy is shown waiting for a flight to London at Dublin Airport, while the Girl, already reunited with her Czech husband, receives the piano the Guy has bought for her. That is, even though the film downplays the likelihood of a US-like assimilation of immigrants in Ireland, the story is rounded off with yet another subversion of the opposition between native and immigrant, as it is the Irish citizen who leaves Dublin to become a migrant in London, and the Czech migrant who stays in the Irish capital.

## 5. Conclusion

580 There can be little doubt that *Once* belongs in the film musical genre, regardless of its documentary aesthetic, bittersweet ending and extremely low budget. More specifically, the narrative unfolds as a backstage musical sprinkled with elements of the folk musical subgenre, and revolves around the development of a romantic friendship between two people from opposite worlds while working together to bring about a musical work of art. That these two opposite worlds are characterized as feminine/immigrant/dreamer and masculine/native/realistic, and that music is the only thing that can bring them together, also help place *Once* firmly in the genre.

585 Given the paramount importance of music in the carefully crafted narrative architecture of the film, the claims to an exclusive use of production sound seem extremely difficult to sustain. In fact, much of the music in the film appears to have been recorded naturalistically on location, even though it is able to pass from the diegetic to the music track and across scenes, muffle all other sounds in the soundtrack, break the synchrony with the images and include the sound of non-diegetic instruments.

590 Despite appearances to the contrary, there is nothing casual, random or even natural in the film's soundtrack and *mise en scène*, as both are in the service of a story within a clearly established genre, from whose main conventions the film only really deviates at the end. As in any other film musical, music, rather than physical action or dialogue, is what drives the narrative and ultimately solves (most of) the initial conflict. A powerful community builder, tool for individual empowerment and connector of different time and reality levels, music is nevertheless not enough to lead the narrative to a conventional happy ending—the Guy and the Girl will not stay together, his future in showbiz remains uncertain and she will have to go back to menial jobs. Consequently, the idealistic assimilation of immigrants that the genre usually proposes is in *Once* only temporary and the separation between communities the narrative questions is actually reasserted at the end.

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<sup>30</sup> Knapp, *National Identity*, 103.

<sup>31</sup> Knapp, *National Identity*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 6.

<sup>33</sup> Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 74.

<sup>34</sup> Altman, *Film Musical*, 63.

<sup>35</sup> Altman, *Film Musical*, 63.

<sup>36</sup> Knapp, *Personal Identity*.

<sup>37</sup> Feuer, *Musical*.

<sup>38</sup> Feuer, *Musical*, 112–24.

<sup>39</sup> Feuer, *Musical*, 42.

<sup>40</sup> Altman, *Film Musical*, 287.

<sup>41</sup> Altman, *Film Musical*, 322.

<sup>42</sup> Feuer, *Musical*, 91.

<sup>43</sup> Altman, *Film Musical*, 272.

<sup>44</sup> Neale, “Questions,” 158–9.

<sup>45</sup> Neale, “Questions,” 158.

<sup>46</sup> Steve Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 48.

<sup>47</sup> Neale, “Questions,” 165.

<sup>48</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

<sup>49</sup> O’Connell, *Irish Storytellers*, 176.

<sup>50</sup> O’Connell, *Irish Storytellers*, 176.

<sup>51</sup> O’Connell, *Irish Storytellers*, 176.

<sup>52</sup> Nessa Johnston, “The Celtic Tiger ‘Unplugged’: DV Realism, Liveness and Sonic Authenticity in *Once* (2007),” *The Soundtrack*, 7.1 (2014): 26.

<sup>53</sup> Mara argues that the scene as a whole “forms the links to older, more traditional cultural sharing of Irish music,” reminding viewers “of the long-term ritual of sharing musical

talent in Dublin” (Miriam Mara, “Just this *Once*: Urban Ireland in Film,” *Irish Studies Review* 18.4 (2010): 433).

<sup>54</sup> Altman, *Film Musical*, 126.

<sup>55</sup> O’Connell, *Irish Storytellers*, 176-7.

<sup>56</sup> For example, the protagonist couples in *Cabaret* (Bob Fosse, 1972), *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975), *All That Jazz* (Bob Fosse, 1979) and, more recently, *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016) do not end up together.

<sup>57</sup> In this vein, Tracy points out that “the couple’s crossing of cultural boundaries is ultimately a digression rather than a re-orientation as they return to the claims of their cultures, pasts and emotional pairings which reinforce rather than break down the divide between the Ireland of 20 years ago and today’s multicultural city dwellers” (Tony Tracy, “*Once* (2006),” *Estudios Irlandeses 2* (2007), [estudiosirlandeses.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Film\\_Reviews\\_2007.pdf](http://estudiosirlandeses.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Film_Reviews_2007.pdf): 271, accessed October 1, 2018).

<sup>58</sup> Mara, “Just this *Once*,” 433.

<sup>59</sup> Altman, *Film Musical*, 64.

<sup>60</sup> Altman, *Film Musical*, 74.

<sup>61</sup> O’Connell, *Irish Storytellers*, 176.

<sup>62</sup> Altman, *Film Musical*, 74.

<sup>63</sup> Janaki Cedanna, “Interview with ‘Once’ Director John Carney by Janaki Cedanna. Part 1,” *Janaki’s Musings*, 2007, [blip.tv/janakis-musings/interview-with-once-director-john-carney-part-1-251984](http://blip.tv/janakis-musings/interview-with-once-director-john-carney-part-1-251984) (accessed May 25, 2015).

<sup>64</sup> Altman, *Film Musical*, 317.