# The Great Pretenders: Genre, Form, and Style in the Film Musicals of John Carney

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# Contents

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# 1 Introduction

John Carney (Dublin, 1972) escapes easy categorisation. He grew up dreaming of becoming a professional musician one day but instead turned to filmmaking when that day finally arrived. He is a pop musician who does not like much pop music.[1] He is a director of film musicals who believes that sound is a "drawback" that makes film "closer to theatre,"[2] and he has seen two of his works hit the Broadway scene despite not particularly liking stage musicals either—or, for that matter, the postmodern self-awareness of early twenty-first century film musicals like *Moulin Rouge* (Luhrmann, 2001), *Chicago* (Marshall, 2002), or *Dreamgirls* (Condon, 2006).[3] He is a self-taught director who first made himself familiar with filmmaking by watching and making music videos and considers them late, abridged offshoots of the classic film musical,[4] but who nevertheless has said that they were not that important to his becoming a filmmaker because they are just "a means of representing the music" and do not have "anything to do with filmmaking."[5] He is a fiercely independent Irish film director who has at the same time worked in the United States for Harvey Weinstein and Amazon and is very aware that the main aim of film is to keep audiences entertained. He is a filmmaker whose "real interest in films was as an artist"[6] and a musician,[7] but he also acknowledges that film "is a commercial, audience-attendance gig"[8] that, as Rod Stoneman kept telling budding Irish filmmakers during his tenure as CEO of the Irish Film Board (IFB) from 1993 to 2003, demands constant compromises between art and commercialism and between the local and the global.

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[1] "Meet John Carney, the man behind the music of *Begin Again*," interview by Darryn King, *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 5, 2014, https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/meet-john-carney-the-man-behind-the-music-of-begin-again-20140806-100ieq.html.
[2] "The Carney," interview by Paula Shields, *Film Ireland* 82, August–September 2001, 13.
[3] "A Dublin antidote to *Dreamgirls*," interview by Brian D. Johnson, *McLean's*, May 28, 2007, 58.
[4] See, e.g., "Colorful Escapism: John Carney on the Fluid Musical Identity of *Sing Street*," interview by Carlos Aguilar, *MovieMaker*, April 15, 2016, https://www.moviemaker.com/john-carney-sing-street-colorful-escapism/.
[5] "From *Once* to *Sing Street*: Director John Carney Infuses Movies with Music," interview by Anne Marie Baldonado, Fresh Air, *NPR*, May 4, 2016, https://www.npr.org/2016/05/04/476741702/from-once-to-sing-street-director-john-carney-infuses-movies-with-music?t=1657817288431.
[6] "Directors in Dialogue—John Carney," interview by Derek O'Connor, *RTÉ*, April 18, 2017, https://www.rte.ie/culture/2017/0410/866677-directors-in-dialogue-john-carney/.
[7] "*Begin Again* Writer-Director John Carney on the Importance of Music in Film," interview by Rebecca Strassberg, *Backstage*, June 27, 2014, https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/begin-writer-director-john-carney-importance-music-film-12827/; "Interview: John Carney *Begin Again*," interview by Jose, *Film Experience*, November 18, 2014, http://thefilmexperience.net/blog/2014/11/18/interview-john-carney-begin-again.html.
[8] "John Carney interview: *Sing Street*, *X-Men*, Hitchcock & more," interview by Simon Brew, *Den of Geek*, May 18, 2016, https://www.denofgeek.com/movies/john-carney-interview-sing-street-x-men-hitchcock-more/.

The youngest of four siblings, Carney was educated at De La Salle College Churchtown and Synge Street CBS, where he became interested in music, formed a school band, and started recording amateur music videos. After leaving school, he was the founding bassist of the rock band The Frames, which Glen Hansard, a native of the infamous Dublin district of Ballymun who dropped out of school at 13 to busk on Grafton Street, formed in 1990. While he was in the band, he directed some of their videos and made some sketches on his own, including a couple of comedies with the band's frontman, who at the time also landed a small role in *The Commitments* (Parker, 1991).[9] It was in 1993, while touring England with The Frames and right after seeing how music videos were shot professionally at Ardmore Studios, that he did what his film characters often do: All of a sudden, he changed course and set his sights on doing something radically different from what he had always envisioned himself doing. Thus, even though being in a band had always been his lifelong dream and even though The Frames had just signed a contract and were beginning to make money, he found that, contrary to his own expectations, he was much happier shooting with a Super-8 camcorder he had just bought or watching movies critically—especially Godard, Bergman, Hitchcock, and the Golden Era Hollywood movies his parents had always encouraged him to watch and which he had loved while growing up—than playing bass on stage.[10] Be that as it may, although he has never related the decision to the climate of confidence in the potential of the Irish audio-visual industry that arose from Neil Jordan winning the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for *The Crying Game* (Jordan, 1992) at the 1993 Oscars and the government's subsequent announcement that it would soon reinstate the IFB, it is unlikely that these events did not influence his change of paths.

In 1995, Carney wrote, produced, and directed *Shining Star* and *Hotel*, two shorts that picked up several awards. He also set up High-Hat Productions with Tom Hall, whom he had met around the

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[9] In 2001 and 2007, Carney said that he did not like *The Commitments* because he found the dialogue unconvincing ("A Dublin antidote"; "The Carney"). In 2016, however, he changed his mind and said that he "love[d]" it, that the script was "great," and that he found it "incredibly funny" ("The Empire Film Podcast #212—John Carney," interview by Chris Hewitt, *Empire Film Podcast*, May 20, 2016, audio, 45:48–45:55, https://planetradio.co.uk/podcasts/the-empire-podcast/id-5934/).

[10] See, e.g., "Directors in Dialogue"; "John Carney: 'I'll never make a film with supermodels again,'" interview by Elisa Bray, *Independent*, May 27, 2016, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/john-carney-i-ll-never-make-film-supermodels-again-once-sing-street-interview-keira-knightley-a7053076.html; "The Carney," 12.

time he quit The Frames and with whom he "had a sort of shared taste in movies."[11] Not really knowing how or expecting to get any funding, the pair started out by making zero-budget films on their own, using friends and family as cast and crew, learning filmmaking as they went along. This is the atmosphere in which they made their debut feature film, *November Afternoon* (1997), a Cassavetes-like black-and-white production on Hi-8 with a funky jazz soundtrack featuring songs by Oscar Peterson and Carney himself that is used "almost as narrative voice in itself, both underscoring and at times commenting on narrative developments."[12] Despite its many technical flaws and controversial subject matter (incest), *November Afternoon* was enthusiastically received at the Cork Film Festival and voted Best Feature of the Year by the *Irish Times*. The film gave the duo some credit with the industry, so their following two works, the TV movie *Just in Time* (1998) and the DV feature film—the first of its kind shot in Ireland—*Park* (1999), were supported by Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) and the IFB, respectively.

Although it failed to find proper distribution due to its engagement with the thorny issue of paedophilia, *Park* opened some big doors for Carney. In 2001, he co-wrote with Daniel James and directed solo his first major production, *On the Edge*, a mid-budget film (about €6.5 million) about mental illness and suicide starring Stephen Rea and Cillian Murphy and funded by Universal, co-produced by Jim Sheridan, and distributed internationally by UIP. The film, which should have been Carney's ticket to the major leagues, turned out to be a commercial and critical disappointment. Yet a new opportunity did not take long to arrive in the form of a TV series. Co-created with his brother Kieran and Tom Hall, shot on DV, and starring Simon Delaney, Don Wycherley, and Keith McErlean, *Bachelors Walk* was originally conceived as a six-part stand-alone drama co-produced by RTÉ, the BBC, and the IFB. However, it ended up running on RTÉ for three successful seasons between 2001 and 2003 and wrapped with a one-off Christmas special in 2006. As audience results on the BBC were disastrous, the British broadcaster pulled out after the first season, so the second was produced by RTÉ and the IFB and the third by RTÉ with Vodafone sponsorship.

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[11] "Directors in Dialogue."
[12] Marina Burke, "*November Afternoon*," *Film Ireland* 58, April–May 1997, 36.

Although *Bachelors Walk* first gave Carney wider recognition in Ireland, another disappointment was around the corner. In 2003, while still working on the series, the Carney brothers and Tom Hall began shooting the sci-fi comedy *Zonad*, the first draft of which they had written in 1999, with Simon Delaney and Cillian Murphy in the main roles. Conceived as a short film or a pilot for a series, it was, however, eventually put off sine die without even being properly edited, while the tapes were allegedly stolen.[13] He then moved on to *Once*, a musical that also seemed doomed to failure and that could indeed have ended in disaster were it not for John Nein, a Sundance Film Festival programmer who fell for it when it premiered at the 2006 Galway Film Fleadh. Originally written for Cillian Murphy to star in, the film was close to not being made when the actor pulled out and most of the secured production money was pulled out with him. Determined to go ahead regardless, Carney convinced Hansard to play the lead and made the film on a tiny budget, with help from the IFB, RTÉ, and Samson Films. The problems did not end here, though. Although *Once* was screened at the Fleadh in the summer of 2006, it was turned down at other film festivals, including Edinburgh, Locarno, London, Rotterdam, Telluride, and Toronto, and by the end of the year it had not yet found a distributor.[14]

Again, it seemed like it was time to move on from yet another unsuccessful project. First, Carney tried returning to TV and made the six-part mockumentary series *The Modest Adventures of David O'Doherty*, written by and starring the eponymous Irish comedian, which RTÉ aired in May 2007 to unimpressive ratings and reviews. He then felt it was the right time to go back to *Zonad*, shape the script into a low-budget feature film, and see whether Delaney was still willing to make it.[15] However, the project had to be postponed for over a year, as the unexpected selection of *Once* for the 2007 edition of Sundance and its enthusiastic reception there kicked off the chain of events that turned

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[13] Aileen Moon, "*Zonad* Crash Lands into Irish Cinemas," *IFTN*, March 11, 2010, http://www.iftn.ie/news/?act1=record&aid=73&rid=4282927&tpl=archnews&only=1; "Has anybody seen Cillian Murphy's *Zonad*?!," *Irish Independent*, March 20, 2010, https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/movies/has-anybody-seeen-cillian-murphys-zonad-26642642.html.
[14] Matthew J. Fee, "'A Musical Dressed Up in a Different Way': Urban Ireland and the Possible Spaces of John Carney's *Once*," in *The Sound of Musicals*, ed. Steven Cohan (London: BFI-Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 178.
[15] Coinciding with this, in what clearly seems like a marketing manoeuvre, a finished scene from the 2003 recordings with Murphy playing the role of Guy popped up out of nowhere on YouTube in late 2006.

it into an international success, Hansard and co-star Marketa Irglova into Oscar winners, and Carney into a filmmaker worthy of Hollywood.[16]

*Once* served another purpose, too: It provided Carney with vindication in retrospect for the often-controversial funding decisions of the IFB throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. As Carney himself has acknowledged, if the state subsidies had not given the Irish filmmakers of his generation "the chance to experiment and fail" and make "bad films" in those years, internationally acclaimed films such as *Once* and *Room* (Abrahamson, 2015) and domestic successes such as *The Young Offenders* (Foott, 2016) might never have come to pass.[17] Furthermore, Carney has also suggested that the successes of recent Irish cinema would not have happened either without the deep change of mentality that Irish society underwent during the Celtic Tiger era. In his opinion, the fact that in the 1990s, the Irish stopped "being […] so obsessed with who [they] are as Irish men and women," the IRA, the Famine, and the Troubles, made it possible for the country to have "a breakthrough in filmmaking"[18] and start telling stories that could be set almost anywhere. Thereafter, by being "hip and very sort of forward-looking and charming and not concerned with those sort of ideas that held it back a little bit" and bringing to the table a "sort of non-Irishness," Irish cinema has been able to succeed in the twenty-first century.[19] As a matter of fact, although he thinks that it is important for filmmakers to know the settings of their films, he considers himself a "Dublin filmmaker with an eye on some sort of international concept of [himself] and [his] country," because being just "a Dublin filmmaker" would be "debilitating" or even "crushing,"[20] as "90% of stories should be able to be told anywhere, unless specifically historical or something."[21] In line with this, he does not regard *Once* "as an Irish film" and thinks that it ultimately worked "because it was quite a universal story."[22]

After the success of *Once*, Hollywood approached Carney to helm a wide variety of projects, most of them related to music, which he either turned down straight away because he found them

[16] In Ireland, however, it "played for only three weeks in […] cinemas before disappearing" (Ruth Barton, *Irish Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019], 28).
[17] "Directors in Dialogue."
[18] "Directors in Dialogue."
[19] "Directors in Dialogue."
[20] "Directors in Dialogue."
[21] "The Carney," 12.
[22] "Directors in Dialogue."

uninteresting or which ended up falling through.[23] Instead, he returned to Ireland, set up an audio-visual production company and facility in Dublin called The Factory with Kirsten Sheridan and Lance Daly, and picked up where he had left off over a year prior. By spring 2009, a low-budget, feature-film version of *Zonad* starring Delaney was complete. The film premiered at the Fleadh in July 2009, was commercially released in Ireland on March 17, 2010, was screened at the Tribeca and Cannes Film Festivals later that year, earned five IFTA nominations, won one IFTA award for Best Score… and little else.[24] Despite the extra publicity that it received as Carney's first film since *Once* and some (over)enthusiastic reports in Irish periodicals hinting that it had been a hit at New York City (NYC) and Cannes, it bombed at the domestic box office and was not even distributed internationally.[25] Far from interpreting this as a sign that he should perhaps consider returning to the musical genre, his following project was another non-musical, *The Rafters*, a gothic horror story set in an old guesthouse on the Aran islands, which fared even worse than *Zonad*, as it failed to secure distribution and was screened at the 2012 Fleadh only.

In the meantime, *Once* was again garnering fame and making money for Carney without him even having to do anything. In October 2008, a team of producers, including John N. Hart Jr., Jeff Sine, Frederick Zollo, and Barbara Broccoli, acquired the stage rights to the film. John Tiffany (direction) and Enda Walsh (book) eventually adapted it, with most of the musical numbers by Hansard and Irglova, scenic design by Bob Crowley, and orchestrations by Martin Lowe. From April 2011 to January 2012, it was first tested at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, MA, and then at the off-Broadway New York Theatre Workshop. Highly successful at both, it finally opened at the Jacobs Theatre on Broadway on March 18, 2012. A critical and commercial success from day one, the play, starring Steve Kazee and Cristin Millioti, received eight Tony awards in 2012 and ran for

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[23] *Town House*, *Dogs of Babel*, and *Russ and Roger Go Beyond* came closest to going into production in 2007, 2011, and 2016, respectively. Based on a novel, *Town House* was about the son of a dead rock star who, after years living off the sales of his father's stuff, was only left with his townhouse. Another literary adaptation, *Dogs of Babel* was announced as a dramedy about a linguistics professor who had lost his wife in an accident at home and had become intent on teaching their dog to talk so that it could tell him what had really happened. The only project based on an original screenplay, *Russ and Roger Go Beyond* was about the making of the X-rated musical comedy *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (Meyer, 1970) and the friendship between Russ Meyer and Roger Ebert.

[24] In 2010, Carney also composed the score for Tom Hall's second solo directorial outing, *Sensation*.

[25] See, e.g., "*Zonad* a huge hit at Cannes Festival," *Wicklow People*, March 27, 2010, https://www.independent.ie/regionals/wicklowpeople/news/zonad-a-huge-hit-at-cannes-festival-27853858.html.

almost 1,200 performances before closing on January 4, 2015. Since 2013, it has also been successfully staged in other cities across the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, as well as in Dublin, Toronto, Seoul, and Buenos Aires.

Speaking in 2017, Carney said that the adaptation of *Once* "afforded [him] a very unique position as a filmmaker" in that he no longer needed to make films out of pressing financial concerns.[26] For the first time in his life, he felt that he could be picky and take his time to only develop projects that he really loved, adding that this applied to his then latest features, *Begin Again* (2013) and especially *Sing Street* (2016).[27] That said, it seems quite obvious that *Begin Again* would also have been born out of the need to revive a career that had stalled after *Once* by yielding to the two things he had most consistently refused to do since 2008: embracing the Hollywood machine and making another musical. Shot in NYC on a budget of $9 (€8.3) million during the summer of 2012, *Begin Again*, starring Keira Knightley and Mark Ruffalo, was acquired for distribution by Harvey Weinstein and grossed over $63 (€58.3) million worldwide, making it by far the highest-grossing movie in Carney's filmography. Although it was also pretty well-received critically, the fact that some critics and fans considered that Carney had renounced his authenticity with the film hurt him deeply, if only because he felt that he had betrayed himself and his fans by making a mid-budget film in the United States with Knightley, a star who did not know anything about music.

Disheartened at how things had unfolded in America, Carney returned to Ireland for his last feature film to date, *Sing Street*, a coming-of-age period musical dramedy that he consistently marketed as the closure to what he had first described in 2014 as a "portfolio" or "series" of musical films,[28] and then re-labelled as a "triptych,"[29] "trilogy," or "little canon."[30] Starring unknown local teenagers, with more established actors in supporting roles, *Sing Street* attracted superb reviews and

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[26] "Directors in Dialogue."
[27] "Directors in Dialogue."
[28] See, e.g., "John Carney goes urban musical *Once* more," interview by Donald Clarke, *Irish Times*, July 12, 2014, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/john-carney-goes-urban-musical-once-more-1.1862099.
[29] See, e.g., "*Once* director John Carney talks '80s pop and Catholic school demerits," interview by Steven Rea, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 16, 2016, https://www.inquirer.com/philly/entertainment/movies/20160417__Once__director_John_Carney_talks__80s_pop_and_Catholic_school_demerits.html.
[30] See, e.g., "Sundance: John Carney Explains How the Crowd-Pleasing *Sing Street* Is Part of a Greater Trilogy," interview by Kate Erbland, *IndieWire*, January 27, 2016, https://www.indiewire.com/2016/01/sundance-john-carney-explains-how-the-crowd-pleasing-sing-street-is-part-of-a-greater-trilogy-30502/.

even made it to the *Time* list of best films for 2016. Commercially, however, it turned in just $13.6 (€12.6) million worldwide, about two-thirds of what *Once* had made almost a decade earlier and just a fifth of the gross for *Begin Again.* This did not discourage the team that had produced the Broadway version of *Once*—with the sole exception of John N. Hart—from acquiring the rights to *Sing Street* and again recruiting Enda Walsh to write the book, Martin Lowe to provide the orchestrations, and Bob Crowley to design the sets. The director chosen this time was not John Tiffany, but Rebecca Taichman. Besides excerpts from 1980s hits and purpose-written songs from the film, the adaptation includes eight new songs by Carney himself and Gary Clark, who also composed much of the original film's soundtrack.

On December 16, 2019, *Sing Street*, starring Brenock O'Connor and Zara Devlin, and set in 1982, opened at the New York Theatre Workshop to warm reviews. Sold out for weeks, the play ended its off-Broadway run on January 26 and was scheduled to open at the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway on April 19. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that the Broadway opening had to be postponed sine die. At the time of writing, after two years of periodic online events aimed at retaining audience interest in the show, *Sing Street* is set to return to the live stage at the Huntington Theatre in Boston from August 26 to October 2, 2022, before heading to Broadway.

Since 2019, Carney has also been said to be developing a film musical project based on the works of George Gershwin, *Fascinating Rhythm*, for Irwin Winkler and Martin Scorsese. More recently, it was announced that he would take over the direction of a yet untitled Bee Gees musical biopic for GK Films and Paramount, the production companies of *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Singer, 2018) and *Rocketman* (Fletcher, 2019), respectively. While it is yet to be seen what comes of these projects (if anything), Carney has again managed to find success on TV. Defined as a romantic anthology series based on the *New York Times* column of the same name, *Modern Love*, which Carney has developed, executive produced, and (along with Tom Hall, Sharon Horgan, and others) written and directed for Amazon, is to date made up of two seasons of eight episodes of about 30 minutes featuring stand-alone stories. Available on Amazon Prime Video, it premiered on October 18, 2019. Although (like other platforms) Amazon does not release viewership figures, an indisputable sign that

the show's first season met the company's expectations was that it was soon renewed for a second, released on August 13, 2021.

Whereas Carney wrote and directed four episodes of the first season and co-wrote another, his involvement in the second was smaller: He directed one episode and wrote and directed another two, "On a Serpentine Road, With the Top Down" and "Strangers on a (Dublin) Train," the latter much commented on for being the only episode set outside NYC and its surroundings. Perhaps due to this lower involvement from Carney, the second season turned out be more clichéd and received worse reviews, with only the cast—which includes both major stars and actors, whether stars or not, with whom Carney has worked before—receiving the same amount of praise.[31] Tellingly, as of May 2022, the show had not yet been renewed for a third season.

Of this varied corpus of work spanning over twenty-five years, this volume focuses on the most successful feature films in Carney's career to date: *Once*, *Begin Again*, and *Sing Street.* Although representative of the *glocal*, cross-over, urban cinema ultimately grown out of the Celtic Tiger's IFB seedbed when it comes to production, distribution, and adherence to the continuity system, these films stand almost alone in their appropriation of the musical genre to address local and personal concerns. In other words, whereas "contemporary Irish filmmaking frequently mixes motifs clearly as nationally specific with an eclectic array of generic features derived from American popular culture,"[32] only these films and, arguably, *Breakfast on Pluto* (Jordan, 2005)[33] take much of such array from the musical—a genre that has continued evading Irish film in the twenty-first century as much as it did in the twentieth, in which only *Finian's Rainbow* (Coppola, 1968), *The Commitments*, and arguably the quota quickies *The Voice of Ireland* (Haddick, 1936), *Shipmates o' Mine* (Mitchell,

[31] The first season currently has an approval rating of 75% on *Rotten Tomatoes*, compared to 62% for the second season on the same platform ("*Modern Love*," in *Rotten Tomatoes*, accessed April 15, 2022, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/modern_love).
[32] Christine Gledhill, "Genre and Nation," in *Genre and Cinema: Ireland and Transnationalism*, ed. Brian McIlroy (London: Routledge, 2007), 11.
[33] As Barton points out, *Breakfast on Pluto*'s lack of plausibility makes it "more akin to John Carney's *Once* and *Sing Street* and the utopian musical […]. As Carney does in *Sing Street*, so Jordan borrows from glam-rock to situate his characters in a global movement of freedom from older, gendered conventions […] The soundtrack propels and acts as a commentary on the narrative [and] references previous cinematic and gendered fantasies of Ireland, [and] the film's vivid colour schemes reference the classic Hollywood musical" (Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 178). However, the film was not positioned or received as a musical; it does not meet many of the genre features discussed in the following chapter, nor does she ever suggest that it be labelled as such.

1936), *Devil's Rock* (Burger, 1938), and *Irish and Proud of It* (Pedelty, 1938), would qualify as Irish musicals.

What are these "nationally specific concerns" of recent Irish cinema? Ruth Barton proposes that while the global is reflected through "its dismissal of the establishment" and authority, the local can be seen in its preoccupation with "the economic circumstances of the Celtic Tiger, the recession, [and] the recovery," "the traumatic inheritance of the past," and "the changing structures of Irish life[,] reflected through a new interest in urban identities,"[34] especially "alienated, struggling individuals who have found themselves on the wrong side of Ireland's new economy."[35] Nevertheless, funded by and aimed at "a global network of film producers and consumers," it also has "to distinguish itself in that crowded marketplace" by "reproducing recognisable identifiers of Irishness and [telling] Irish stories," even though its urban "non-spaces" and stories that could be set anywhere offer as "'true' a representation [of contemporary Irish life] as any other."[36] Likewise, the exploration of trauma is often "as much outward-looking as inward" and allows worldwide audiences to engage with local traumas such as "miscarriages of justice, clerical sexual abuse, the legacy of violence, or emigration."[37] This engagement is facilitated by the widespread use of genre cinema conventions, which Barton finds even in films by arthouse "auteurs" such as Neil Jordan and Lenny Abrahamson, which takes us back to the cross-over vocation of the strain of Irish cinema into which Carney's musicals can be placed.[38]

This book does not aim to rate *Once*, *Begin Again*, and *Sing Street* on a scale of Irishness or, to put it differently, to assess the extent to which they fit into our own or anyone else's concept of Irish identity and/or national cinema. While it is true that "the majority of Irish-made films remain Irish set and Irish themed,"[39] recent Irish co-productions like *Viva* (Breathnach, 2015), *Room*, *The Lobster* (Lanthimos, 2015), *Brooklyn* (Crowley, 2015), as well as Carney's *Begin Again* and *Sing*

[34] Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 225–26.
[35] Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 34.
[36] Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 226.
[37] Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 226.
[38] Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 32–37.
[39] Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 19.

*Street*, show that "the understanding of what constitutes a national cinema is ever more elusive,"[40] and that traditional markers of national origin (such as setting, language, funding, or artistic crew) are often ambiguous or, rather, *transnational*.[41] Bearing this in mind, we first aim to examine how the form and style of three musical films written and directed by an Irish filmmaker not only allow each to narrate a story in a certain, coherent way but also engage with universal, national, and personal concerns, with each other, with other Irish and American films, and with mainstream (sub)genres—especially the musical. As David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith point out,

> Form is the overall patterning of a film, the ways its parts work together to create specific effects […]. Style involves the film's use of cinematic techniques. Those techniques fall into four categories: mise-en-scène, or the arrangement of people, places, and objects to be filmed […]; cinematography, the use of cameras and other machines to record images and sounds […]; editing, the piecing together of individual shots […]; and sound, the voices, sound effects, and music that blend on a film's audio track […].[42]

Paraphrasing John Donne, we could say that *no film is an island, entire of itself*. No film is created, marketed, consumed, and read without an awareness, conscious or unconscious, of many other films. Intertextual relations are inevitably drawn at each of these stages, and films perceived to be similar are grouped into (blanket) genres, subgenres, modes, formulas, and/or cycles that share certain formal and stylistic conventions. As we discuss further below, these groupings—especially genre—are essential in film marketing, as they greatly reduce audience uncertainty about the pleasure that can be derived from seeing a given movie and, accordingly, the likelihood of disappointment.

Film texts are normally encoded so that they guide viewers towards the genre(s) into which creative teams expect such texts to be decoded.[43] Although film marketers often emphasize some of these genres and downplay others to improve the commercial prospects of films, what they seldom do is ignore the genre cues in the films themselves and set up expectations that they cannot possibly

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[40] Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 1.
[41] See further, e.g., Patrick Brodie, "Deterritorialising Irish Cinema," *Nordic Irish Studies* 15, no. 2 (2017): 79–96, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44363845; Roddy Flynn and Tony Tracy, "Quantifying National Cinema: A Case Study of the Irish Film Board, 1993–2013," *Film Studies* 14 (2016): 32–53, quoted in Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 19.
[42] David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 12th. ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2019), 3.
[43] See Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1973).

meet. As the disastrous marketing campaign for *The Village* (Shyamalan, 2004) proved, this is a highly risky strategy that can not only seriously damage the commercial prospects of a film, but also the brand reputation of the creative personnel, the studio, or even the distributor involved. However, this is exactly what occurred in the cases of *Once*, *Begin Again*, and (to a certain extent) *Sing Street*.

A significant part of this work is devoted to exploring the textual articulation of genre in these three films and the discrepancies between such articulation, that resulting from the marketing discourse accompanying each release (the *pretension* in the titles of the volume and chapters 2, 3, and 4), and professional reviews from the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Ireland. More specifically, chapter 2 begins by discussing how *Once*, a very low-budget yet professionally made fictional film whose narrative largely follows the conventions of the classic Hollywood musical, was deliberately initially marketed as an amateurish, (semi-)documentary romance movie, because it was feared that *musical* could both scare away young audiences and alienate fans of the genre by setting up expectations of high production values. It was only after festival audiences in the United States responded warmly, and critics welcomed it as a renewal of the genre, that the musical label was incorporated into the marketing discourse. Next, after briefly reviewing the conventions that make a musical a musical, we focus on the narrative strategies that qualify *Once* as a backstage musical, and how these were first adapted to the film's Irish setting and production circumstances and then concealed or distorted during promotion. More specifically, we propose that when one looks through its dense outer layer of *cinéma vérité*, as with countless classic Hollywood musicals, *Once* is about two dispossessed characters belonging to social groups constructed as opposites who come together and achieve agency during the narrative by collaborating in a series of musical numbers. Furthermore, although supposedly live, spontaneous, and reliant on location sound only, these numbers are anything but: Carefully (post-)produced, they offer glimpses of the genre's alternative, better (musical) realities while advancing the plot towards a climax in which the leads successfully jointly create a musical work of art.

As the films themselves did with respect to *Once*, the following chapters build and expand on chapter 2 to examine *Begin Again* and *Sing Street*, in that order. Chapter 3 opens with an analysis of the anxiety that dominated the promotion of *Begin Again*, specifically how to make it appealing to the

millions of mainstream viewers necessary to recoup the substantial costs of this star vehicle, US remake of *Once* while also retaining the niche fanbase of Carney's previous musical. After looking closely at publicity interviews and materials, especially the poster, we argue that the promotional campaign for *Begin Again* was a remake of sorts of that for *Once* and that, consequently, the film was also marketed as something that it was largely not: a musical where Carney did not remake *Once* but simply remained true to its authentic, guerrilla filmmaking style. As we explain next, although *Begin Again* was mildly favourably reviewed and had a good box office return, critics did not respond as enthusiastically to its misleading marketing strategy; as a result, *Begin Again* could not avoid being considered by most a likeable yet much less authentic and original version of *Once*. The lengthy final section of the chapter explores in depth the numerous intertextual *autocitations* from *Once* in the narrative of *Begin Again* and concludes that, despite the difference in production values and some other minor issues, the latter must be primarily considered a remake of the former.[44] Moreover, it argues that some of the character traits and storyline of the male lead may have been modelled on the action-film (anti)heroes of the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially the protagonist of *The Last Boy Scout* (Scott, 1991).

The fourth and final chapter before the conclusion examines *Sing Street* as a film aimed at avoiding the main mistakes that Carney thought he had made in *Begin Again*, presenting viewers with something that could effectively evoke the indie spirit of *Once* without either being regarded as yet another remake of his breakout film or risking losing the mainstream appeal of his second musical. We propose that he was indeed able to meet these goals by again shooting an Irish-set musical with largely unknown actors and embedding the narrative of his previous musicals in a nostalgic coming-of-age story set in the 1980s, with references to *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis, 1985) and a catchy soundtrack of hits from the era and original songs in the same style. By examining two of the posters for *Sing Street*, we argue that the film's marketers also learned from past mistakes and, despite Carney's claims that *Sing Street* was neither a coming-of-ager nor a reflection on post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, focused on better aligning the film's genre positioning with its textual content and making the

[44] On *autocitation*, see Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2000), 337: 2, quoted in Christopher Verevis, *Film Remakes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 21.

horizon of expectations less dependent on the viewer's knowledge of *Once* and *Sing Street*.[45] Although all these efforts did not really pay off commercially, we also explain that *Sing Street* was critically very well received and generally saluted as a return to the style that Carney had largely abandoned in *Begin Again*.

[45] Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

## 2. *Once* (2006): The Musical That Pretended It Wasn't a Musical[1]

> My opening line is always going to be, "Oh, he's the guy who did that Once thing" […] and owning up to that and realizing, OK, I've made a film that meant a lot to a bunch of people at a certain time. That's a wonderful thing and you should never underestimate that. And you should never question it and if that's the thing that you're remembered for, God blessed.[2]

Although John Carney already had plans to one day make a Dublin-set musical as early as 2001, he did not start drafting what would eventually become *Once* until the mid-2000s.[3] When he finally put pen to paper, he decided that the film would be a sort of artistic musical reflection on the alienation and self-doubt he was experiencing at the time. After more than ten years of filmmaking and with his mid-30s fast approaching, his only indisputable success (in Ireland, at least) was *Bachelors Walk*, his girlfriend had moved to London, his parents were getting older, his hometown was changing faster than he could keep up with due to the booming Celtic Tiger economy and the massive influx of immigration it was attracting into Ireland, and he kept wondering whether he should have moved to the British capital when he was in his 20s and tried to pursue a career in music.

Carney wanted to embed these feelings in "a simple setting and storyline that could use songs in a way that a modern audience would accept."[4] With *Busker* as the working title, the story began to take shape around "a Dubliner who was more like one of the immigrants"[5] and "who, having nothing, ha[d] nothing to lose,"[6] a simple romance[7] between this character and an immigrant based on his own experience,[8] and some pre-existing songs by Glen Hansard. The title was later changed to *Once*, as he realised that the story was also inspired by the many creative Irish people he knew who always found something that needed to be done urgently ("Once I finish this, I'll…"), to the point that they never

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[1] A previous version of this chapter was published as "The Musical That Pretended It Wasn't a Musical: Genre and Narrative Style in *Once*" in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 36, no. 8 (2019): 666–89, https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2019.1593029.
[2] "From *Once* to *Sing Street.*"
[3] "The Carney," 12.
[4] "John Carney and Cast Interview, *Once*," interview by Sheila Roberts, *Movies Online*, 2007, https://web.archive.org/web/20080628220150/http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews_12026.html.
[5] "Director John Carney Talks about Hit Film *Once*," interview, March 21, 2008, *Clash Music*, https://www.clashmusic.com/feature/director-john-carney-talks-about-hit-film-once.
[6] "Carney and Cast."
[7] "Carney and Cast."
[8] "Glen Hansard Tells the Story of Acting in the Film *Once*," interview by Sam Jones, *Off Camera with Sam Jones*, May 7, 2016, video, 1:50–1:58, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJKK8FlzPuM.

started working on the masterpiece novel, film, or album project they had been bragging about for years.[9]

The male lead was written for Cillian Murphy, whom he knew from *On the Edge* and the unfinished early version of *Zonad*. Also a musician himself, Murphy initially agreed to play the part but ended up dropping out just one month before principal photography was due to start—in Carney and Hansard's opinion, because some of the songs were much too difficult for him to sing.[10] Whatever the reason for his leaving the project, it put the film in a precarious financial situation, as most of the backers withdrew their support as soon as they learned that the then up-and-coming star would not be in it. With the project on the verge of being called off, Carney decided to scale it down and offer the role to Hansard, who was already in charge of the soundtrack. Hansard was reluctant to take it over because he had sour memories of his dabbling in acting in *The Commitments*, felt that the story was in many ways too close to his own life, and feared that his limited acting skills could ruin the film.[11] In the end, however, the filmmaker prevailed, and Hansard would star alongside the young Czech musician Marketa Irglova, the daughter of a promoter who had often hosted Hansard in his home while The Frames were touring the Czech Republic. A friend of Hansard's and his musical partner in the duo that would later be known as The Swell Season,[12] Irglova had been cast as the female protagonist on his recommendation when Murphy was still on board.[13]

Finally budgeted at €130,000 (and completed at an estimated total cost of €180,000),[14] *Once* was shot on two HDV cameras—the format used in *Bachelors Walk* and the unfinished first version of *Zonad*—in Dublin with a crew of twelve over a fortnight in January 2006, with a few pick-ups done

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[9] John Carney, "Commentary with Writer/Director John Carney and Actor/Musicians Glen Hansard & Marketa Irglova," in *Once*, DVD, dir. John Carney (London: Icon Home Entertainment UK, 2007).
[10] "Exclusive: *Once* Filmmaker John Carney," interview by Edward Douglas, *ComingSoon*, January 31, 2007, https://www.comingsoon.net/extras/news/18658-exclusive-once-filmmaker-john-carney; "Glen Hansard interview: The singer-songwriter on finding fame in *The Commitments* and *Once*," interview by Nick Duerden, *Independent*, October 3, 2015, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/glen-hansard-interview-the-singersongwriter-on-finding-fame-in-the-commitments-and-once-a6677831.html.
[11] "Hansard Tells," 1:20–2:45.
[12] The duo was the subject of an eponymous music documentary released in 2011. Directed by Nick August-Perna, Chris Dapkins, and Carlo Mirabella-Davis, the film chronicles their 2007–2009 world tour and the progressive deterioration of their relationship during the tour.
[13] Chris Neal, "Once Upon a Time," *Performing Songwriter*, June 2008, 84; "Hansard Tells," 0:30–1:05.
[14] Lir Mac Cárthaigh, "*Once*: From the Heart," *Film Ireland* 115, March–April 2007, 13.

a few weeks later. It premiered at the Galway Film Fleadh the same year.[15] It was there that the Sundance programmer John Nein spotted it, which paved the way for *Once* to be selected in late 2006 for the 2007 edition of the indie festival without having secured commercial distribution.[16] Screened to rave reviews and packed, enthusiastic houses at Sundance, *Once* garnered the audience award in the World Cinema Dramatic Competition and was acquired for US distribution by Fox Searchlight—allegedly for a six-digit fee.[17] Fox released it in the United States on only two screens, one in Los Angeles and one in New York, on Friday, May 18, 2007. As the film made the highest per-screen average of the weekend (€31,000), the distributor decided to expand it progressively to more theatres with the expectation that, aided by an unprecedented critical willingness to make it succeed, it could cross over from the arthouse into the mainstream.[18] By mid-June, *Once* was playing in 95 screens across the country and 140 by early the following month. When it finished its theatrical run, it had grossed about 10 million dollars, won numerous other awards, including the Academy Award for Best Original Song at the 2008 Oscars, and received praise from Steven Spielberg and Bob Dylan, among many other top film and music personalities.

*Once* centres on the Girl (Irglova) and the Guy (Hansard), two gifted but precariously employed musicians in contemporary Dublin. A young married Czech mother, the Girl works as a *Big Issue* trader, flower seller, and domestic cleaner and lives with her toddler daughter and mother in an old apartment on Mountjoy Square. A native Dubliner, the Guy is a childless, thirtysomething repairman who lives with his father in the suburbs 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,

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[15] About €5,000 was spent on renting the crane for the closing shot ("Carney and Cast").
[16] Carney and Hansard have been often asked whether they expected *Once* to be so successful while making it. Depending on the interview, we may see that they believed that it would find no distributors and end up being sold on DVD at concerts of The Frames, or that Carney was already 100% sure that it would connect with audiences when he started writing it, or just a few days into filming. See, e.g., "Carney: 'I'll never'"; "Exclusive: *Once*"; "From busker to Oscar," interview by Neil McCormick, *Irish Independent*, March 1, 2008, https://www.independent.ie/lifestyle/from-busker-to-oscar-26426920.html; "*Once* Director on His Newest Stealth Musical *Sing Street*," interview by Peter Travers, *ABC News*, April 27, 2016, video, 11:55–12:05, https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/video/director-john-carney-newest-stealth-musical-sing-street-38704169.
[17] Mac Cárthaigh, "From the Heart," 13.
[18] "'*Once* I acquired an Irish film.' Michael Open interviews Tony Safford, Head of Acquisitions for Fox Searchlight," interview by Michael Open, *Film Ireland* 121, March–April 2008, 15; Shane Hickey, "Once upon a time… a small Irish film felled a giant called Shrek," *Irish Independent,* July 2, 2007, https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/once-upon-a-time-a-small-irish-film-felled-a-giant-called-shrek-26301862.html.

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 families 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 demo tape, with which the Guy hopes 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. 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.

This chapter aims to see through the supposedly "real feelings [without] overlay of technique, effect or style"[19] that 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 briefly explores the concept of genre and the shifts in the generic ascription of the film upon its release. Next, we look at the musical genre and describe some of its primary features and subgenres. Finally, we conduct a formal analysis of several scenes in the film and discuss whether and how the narrative strategies therein adhere to the conventions of the screen musical.

## Film Marketing vs. Film Criticism: From Indie Romance to Film Musical

Much has been written about the charming documentary feel of *Once* as both a cinematic text and an act of film production. Shot in the streets of Dublin with a small crew, on a short budget, and without permits, *Once* certainly has the Cassavetes-like documentary feel of *November Afternoon*, with handheld and long-lens shots in real locations, shaky movement, natural light, jump cuts, home video footage, seemingly improvised dialogue, and "passers-by becoming unwitting performers."[20] Also contributing to the impression of *cinéma vérité* is the fact that the film was initially marketed as an indie romance in the vein of Richard Linklater's *Before* trilogy (*Before Sunrise* [1995], *Before*

[19] Roger Ebert, "*Once* Movie Review," *Roger Ebert*, December 24, 2007, www.rogerebert.com/reviews/once-2007.
[20] Díóg O'Connell, *New Irish Storytellers: Narrative Strategies in Film* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2010), 174.

*Sunset* [2004], *Before Midnight* [2013]). According to Carney, the label *musical* would have scared off younger 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.'"[21]

Although the generally massive box office of blockbusters and the impressive success among youngsters of the *High School Musical* TV movie and films (Kirchner, 2006; Ortega, 2007, 2008) prove him wrong,[22] and the making of *Once* itself can be related to the hopes for a comeback of the genre on the coat-tails of *Moulin Rouge* and *Chicago*,[23] the strategy seems natural given that the low production values of *Once* are indeed as great a deterrent to the target audience of the Hollywood musical as overt artificiality is to that of indie films. Indeed, it seemed highly unlikely that *Once* could beat contemporary high-profile musicals like *Dreamgirls*, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (Burton, 2007), *Hairspray* (Shankman, 2007), or even the more modest *High School Musical* franchise, at their own game. Accordingly, the initial marketing campaign for *Once* made a virtue of necessity: forwarding realism as a conscious aesthetic choice and largely dropping the film musical ascription in favour of vaguer labels such as *indie romance*—as if *realism* and *musical* could not go together in the same sentence. In other words, the early stages of promotion followed the then-recent examples of *Strictly Ballroom* (Luhrmann, 1992), *Everyone Says I Love You* (Allen, 1996), *Shall We Dance* (Suo, 1996), *Little Voice* (Herman, 1998), *Dancer in the Dark* (Von Trier, 2000), and *Billy Elliot* (Daldry, 2000), mostly Miramax-distributed, successful international small-scale musicals from the 1990s that were called *indie art films* rather than *(art) musicals* despite fitting into the Hollywood musical mould.[24]

Another older, yet perhaps more relevant, template for the promotion of *Once* can be found in the New Hollywood backstage country musical *Nashville* (Altman, 1975). A recreation of the 1930s Hollywood musical, made at a time when traditional musicals had fallen out of favour with general

[21] "Interview with *Once* Director John Carney: Part 2," interview by Janaki Cedanna, *Janaki's Musings*, May 30, 2007, video, https://web.archive.org/web/20131018092315/http://blip.tv/janakis-musings/interview-with-once-director-john-carney-part-2-252078.
[22] For a detailed analysis of the phenomenal success of the franchise, its adherence to the conventions of the film musical, and its influence on contemporary teen musicals, see Steven Cohan, "Introduction: How Do You Solve a Problem Like the Film Musical?," in *The Sound of Musicals*, ed. Steven Cohan (London: BFI-Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5–12.
[23] Cohan, "Introduction," 1.
[24] Jane Feuer, "The International Art Musical: Defining and Periodising Post-1980s Musicals," in *The Sound of Musicals*, ed. Steven Cohan (London: BFI-Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 54–63.

audiences and released after the massive flop of *At Long Last Love* (Bodganovich, 1975), *Nashville* had a rather schizophrenic marketing campaign, not so different from that of *Once* or, for that matter, those of *Begin Again* and *Sing Street*. On the one hand, fearing that the association with out-of-fashion traditional musicals could harm it commercially, "the description of the film as 'a musical' is generally absent from advertising materials aimed at the media, Altman's own promotional interviews that accompanied the film's opening in June 1975, and descriptions by the other members of the creative team." [25] What is more, unlike traditional musicals, where pre-existing songs were often recycled and the hierarchical division of labour prevented actors from writing their own songs, the tunes in *Nashville* were advertised as having been written by each cast member themselves from their "character's point of view" for greater realism, even though "for some, it was a first film, and a first singer-songwriter experience."[26] On the other hand, in the materials aimed at the industry, including exhibitors, *Nashville* was instead marketed "as the product of professional musicians."[27]

Although the appearance of singer-songwriters performing their own songs on screen and *Nashville*'s "visual and aural references to the concert documentary" represent significant departures from the classic backstage musical, in many other respects the film closely adheres to it, if only because most of the songs were indeed written and performed by professionals, and the storyline and characters were built around pre-existing tunes.[28] As Steve 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."[29] By eschewing the label *musical*, Altman and his marketing team tried to build an audience for *Nashville*, to instil in it a different set of expectations than they would have for a

[25] Gayle Sherwood Magee, "Robert Altman and the New Hollywood Musical," in *The Sound of Musicals*, ed. Steven Cohan (London: BFI-Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 154.
[26] Robert Altman, Liner notes to *Nashville: The Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, *Nashville: The Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, ABC Records ABCD-893, 1975, LP, re-release, MCA 0881701332, 2000, CD, quoted in Magee, "Robert Altman," 154.
[27] Magee, "Robert Altman," 156.
[28] Magee, "Robert Altman," 155–56.
[29] Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre," in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 158.

musical and, in doing so, to establish "a regime of verisimilitude" where the classic musical traits of the film could pass unnoticed rather than arouse rejection.[30]

By initially rejecting the musical ascription and labelling of *Once* primarily as an indie romance, John Carney and his marketing team likewise tried to build an audience for the film, instil in it a different set of expectations than they would have for a musical, and establish a regime of verisimilitude where the classic musical traits of the film could pass unnoticed and its low production values and documentary mise-en-scène could be considered "appropriate."[31] Fox further reinforced this strategy by putting Hansard and Irglova, who by that point were in both an artistic and romantic relationship, alongside Carney on a bus for two tours with screenings, Q&As, and live music performances across major US cities before the platform release in May, and then in parallel with the beginning of an Oscar campaign for Best Original Song in August.[32] Moreover, "in his US interviews, Carney consistently played down his extensive Irish film and television oeuvre. He was reluctant to discuss Hansard's previous work in *The Commitments*, preferring to suggest that the three of them were amateurs with little previous experience" and that the film was "an underdog."[33]

All in all, they were trying to constrain the possible ways in which the film was to be "interpreted, guiding [viewers] towards a *preferred reading.*"[34] As Denis McQuail argues, "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."[35] That is, from a film marketing perspective, the genre is "an indication of the experience which the film consumer will

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[30] Neale, "Questions," 158–59.
[31] Neale, "Questions," 158.
[32] Anthony Breznican, "*Once* isn't enough: Film gets marketing push," *USA Today*, August 7, 2007, 01d; "*Once* Tour Rolls Across America," *IFTN*, May 8, 2007, http://www.iftn.ie/news/?act1=record&only=1&aid=73&rid=4280297&tpl=archnews&force=1.
[33] Nessa Hardiman, "'*Once* Won't Happen Twice': Peripherality and Equality as Strategies for Success in a Low-Budget Irish Film," in *Contemporary Irish Film: New Perspectives on a National Cinema*, eds. Werner Huber and Sean Crosson (Vienna: Braumüller, 2011), 88–89.
[34] Daniel Chandler, "An Introduction to Genre Theory" (Aberystwyth University, 1997), 8, https://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/chandler_genre_theory.pdf.
[35] Denis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction* (London: Sage, 1987), 200.

have upon watching a particular film."[36] Nevertheless, audiences, critics, and the industry often differ in their labelling of films, and labels can and often do change over time.[37] In fact, genres are "in a constant process of negotiation and change"[38] and, what is more, they often "change, develop, and vary by borrowing from, and overlapping with, one another"[39] or by incorporating conventions or "controversial public debates circulating in neighbouring media—for example changing discourses and representations around gender, ethnicity, and sexuality."[40] Furthermore, many films resist a univocal ascription, and hybrids abound, meaning that clear-cut, stable canons are difficult to establish, "there is no definitive list of film genres[,] a number of terms can be used to identify very similar types of film,"[41] and the distinction between (blanket) genres, subgenres, modes, formulas, and cycles is often rather blurry.[42]

As occurred in the case of *Nashville*, it was critics who first unambiguously classified *Once* as a musical. Free from any fears of alienating audiences, most of them instantly welcomed it as a breath of fresh air in the hackneyed musical genre. To give a few examples from contemporary reviews, the film was described as "a low-budget musical,"[43] a film that "deconstructs" and "reinvents" the film musical "as something wholly new, inspired and alive,"[44] "a full-blown musical without anyone bursting into song,"[45] "the most naturalistic musical ever,"[46] "a musician's musical,"[47] an "indie musical,"[48] "the most naturalistic and believable romantic musical you may ever see and hear,"[49] a

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[36] Finola Kerrigan, *Film Marketing* (Amsterdam: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2010), 95.
[37] Neale, "Questions"; Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 15–16.
[38] David Buckingham, *Children Talking Television: The Making of Television Literacy* (London: The Falmer Press, 1993), 137.
[39] Neale, "Questions," 166.
[40] Gledhill, "Genre," 13.
[41] Kerrigan, *Film Marketing*, 95.
[42] Altman, *Film/Genre*, 50–77; Neale, "Questions," 166–67.
[43] Bob Mondello, "*Once*," *NPR*, May 17, 2007, https://www.npr.org/2007/05/17/10256223/once?t=1659086518322.
[44] Christy Lemire, "*Once*," *Associated Press*, May 14, 2007, http://movies.aol.com/news/articles/_a/review-small-once-is-a-huge-surprise/n20070514193709990002, quoted in *Rotten Tomatoes*, s.v. "*Once*," accessed July 29, 2022, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/once.
[45] Dennis Harvey, "*Once*," *Variety*, January 29, 2007, https://variety.com/2007/film/awards/once-3-1200510777/.
[46] Roger Moore, "*Once*," *Orlando Sentinel*, June 28, 2007, quoted in *Rotten Tomatoes*, s.v. "*Once*," accessed July 29, 2022, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/once.
[47] Andrew Sarris, "*Once*," *Observer*, June 27, 2007, quoted in *Rotten Tomatoes*, s.v. "*Once*," accessed July 29, 2022, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/once.
[48] Linda Barnard, "*Once*: A Bijou of a Film," *Toronto Star*, May 25, 2007, https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/movies/2007/05/25/once_a_bijou_of_a_film.html.

reinvention "of the movie musical as a genre of swooning rock 'n' roll realism,"[50] "a heart-breaking low-fi musical,"[51] and "really, truly a musical, in the best sense of the word."[52] 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."[53]

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

## 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."[54] 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."[55]

John Bush Jones, Peter Stanfield, Raymond Knapp, and Massimiliano Sala, among many others, agree that the musical was born in the United States in the late nineteenth century. At first, it was heavily influenced by operetta, minstrelsy, vaudeville, burlesque, and extravaganza, and closely

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[49] Terry Lawson, "*Once*," *Detroit Free Press*, May 25, 2007, quoted in *Rotten Tomatoes*, s.v. "*Once*," accessed July 29, 2022, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/once.
[50] Ty Burr, "For *Once*, a Rock Musical with an Irresistible Charm," *Boston Globe*, May 25, 2007, https://archive.boston.com/ae/movies/articles/2007/05/25/for_once_a_rock_musical_with_an_irresistible_charm/.
[51] Nathan Rabin, "*Once*," *AV Club*, May 17, 2007, https://film.avclub.com/once-1798202656.
[52] Richard Roeper, "*Once* movie review," *Ebert & Roeper*, May 21, 2007, video, 3:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5LgKMNvF7k.
[53] "Carney Talks about Hit Film *Once*."
[54] Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 15.
[55] Massimiliano Sala, "Preface," in *From Stage to Screen: Musical films in Europe and United States (1927–1961)*, ed. Massimiliano Sala (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), IX.

tied to the social need to cope with two disruptive social phenomena that have continued up to the present day: immigration and modernisation. The answer the musical gives to these shifts would be a restorative, escapist, inclusive, utopian[56] vision of America and American identity, one that was "more amenable, more open, to immigrant cultures"[57] despite the persistence of some Old World patriarchal prejudices about homosexuals, women, non-whites, and non-Anglo-Saxon European nationalities.[58]

In musicals, music and/or dance are presented as community builders and tools for individual empowerment, as ethnic minorities, queer people, 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."[59] 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, story and spectacle, and reality and dream worlds, it "break[s] with the cinema's dominant codes of realism of securing the unity of time and space for a film's fictive world" and yields multiple diegeses.[60]

Film musicals usually climax in a successful opening night that celebrates the triumph of the show and (typically heterosexual) love against all odds,[61] at once an "Ode to Entertainment"[62] and, although this may be not always the case in post-studio musicals, "the coupling of the principals,

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[56] Alexandra Grabarchuck, "The Finality of Stories such as These: Exploring Narrative and Concept in Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*," in *From Stage to Screen: Musical films in Europe and United States (1927–1961)*, ed. Massimiliano Sala (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 114.
[57] Peter Stanfield, *Body and Soul: Jazz and Blues in American Film, 1927–63* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 177.
[58] See Knapp, *National Identity*, chapters 6, 8, 10.
[59] Raymond Knapp, "*Getting off the Trolley*: Musical *contra* Cinematic Reality," in *From Stage to Screen: Musical films in Europe and United States (1927–1961)*, ed. Massimiliano Sala (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 168.
[60] Cohan, "Introduction," 3.
[61] In a 2010 paper revising some of his views on the genre, Altman adds homosocial relationships to the obstacles that heterosexual love must often overcome in film musicals. While the former dominate musical beginnings and "at least one of the young lovers is initially presented in the company of one or more same-sex friends," these relationships must have been replaced with the latter by the film's end—a "rite of passage" that, he argues, "specifically negates the alternative possibility of movement from relationships that are only homosocial to fully homosexual bonds" and points towards a distinctive conservative agenda within the genre (Rick Altman, "From Homosocial to Heterosexual: The Musical's Two Projects," in *The Sound of Musicals*, ed. Steve Cohan [London: BFI-Palgrave Macmillan, 2010], 25, 28).
[62] Jane Feuer, *El Musical de Hollywood*, trans. Fuen F. Escribano and Rafael R. Tranche (1982; Madrid: Verdoux, 1992), 55–56.

whose marriage […] both symbolizes the resolution of larger conflicts and finds resonance in the community so established."[63] This coupling is also almost always intended to be read as a metaphor for the United States by heritage American and recent immigrant, homosexual and heterosexual, audiences.[64]

The larger conflicts above tend to be developed through dual-focus narratives[65] and personified in the (conventionally opposite-sex) principals, who embody "seemingly incompatible peoples—or families, classes, races, ideas, ideologies, or whatever"[66] that must ultimately be reconciled, as must be the tensions between naturalism and dialogue and artificiality and music. Already present in stage musicals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these tensions were exacerbated as the genre began to be transferred to the screen, whereby song and dance were bound to become much more artificial, sets much more naturalistic, and transitions into song and dance much less plausible.[67] Although Hollywood initially developed the backstage or show musical to try to render the breaks with realism characteristic of the genre more believable to audiences, the progressive reduction in camera sizes from the 1950s onwards, the growing audience demand for realism, and the success of films like *The Sound of Music* (Wise, 1965) significantly increased the number of musicals shot on location during the 1960s and 1970s, making these tensions even more salient.

Rick 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."[68] In fact, Altman considers the audio dissolve the main stylistic trait of film musicals, as the superimposition of sound allows the diegetic track to constantly pass to the music track "through the intermediary of diegetic music."[69] In other words, conversations

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[63] Knapp, "Cinematic Reality," 158–59.
[64] Knapp, *National Identity*, 103.
[65] Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 16–27.
[66] Knapp, *National Identity*, 9.
[67] Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 6.
[68] Altman, *Film Musical*, 74.
[69] Altman, *Film Musical*, 63.

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."[70]

According to Jane Feuer and Raymond Knapp,[71] 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 theatre. 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. A great number of film musicals are show musicals about how stage musicals or other (musical) works of art are made, and the many obstacles that writers, musicians, and actors (i.e., the community)[72] 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 in show film musicals, along with the lives of the artists who made them possible.[73] Nevertheless, over the course of the narrative, the stage often extends beyond the theatre, so that the main characters can break into musical numbers virtually anywhere and invite bystanders to join in.[74] Although these bystanders turn out to be professional performers, and music usually transforms the storyworld into something artificial, oneiric, or simply 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 open to anyone. Indeed, in yet another attempt to bridge the gap between screen and viewer, the climactic opening night sequence in backstage musicals almost always includes point-of-view (POV) shots from the front rows and direct addresses to the camera by the performers, encouraging film audiences to identify with the diegetic spectators and share the experience of engaging with a live show, further reinforcing the dual register upon which the narrative rests.[75]

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[70] Altman, *Film Musical*, 63.
[71] Knapp, *Personal Identity*.
[72] Feuer, *Musical.*
[73] Feuer, *Musical,* 112–24.
[74] Feuer, *Musical,* 42.
[75] Cohan, "Introduction," 4.

With the rise of the rock-pop concert and festival as forms of mass entertainment for late twentieth-century audiences, rather than an opening night, the backstage film musical has turned to the recreation of performances and/or tours by singers and bands, fictional and real, and narratives where the action progresses towards a climactic sequence in which either the most iconic performance or the last before the band's breakup is presented. This kind of film, in which characters hardly ever burst into song and musical numbers are normally circumscribed to rehearsals, performances, and/or recordings at studios and venues, often come close to the visual grammar of—or are hybridised with—another two (sub)genres also born out of the encounter between film and contemporary popular music: the concert film and the rockumentary. As a result, they are far more open to using *cinéma vérité* techniques (e.g., handheld cameras), recording audience reactions to what is happening on stage, and expanding the sense of community to audiences and fans than classic film musicals.[76]

However important they are in backstage musicals, bystanders, off-theatre stages, and traditional forms of song and dance are even more important in folk musicals, where "professional musicians rarely appear as […] characters."[77] Apparently more open to realism due to its reliance on location photography, the folk musical nevertheless romanticises small communities as havens from the stark individualism, consumerism, and suburban cultural uniformity of (post-)modernity. In short, the folk musical nostalgically (re-)creates a lost world of traditional, authentic communal values, "a myth to dissemble the break between production and consumption, between capital and labour, between past and present" that paradoxically "must be carried by the very mass media which represent its avowed enemy."[78]

As an overall genre, the musical "offers itself as the spectator's dream, the spectator's show"[79] and "satisfies the spectator's desire to escape from a humdrum day-to-day existence,"[80] even though it "does not […] present models of utopian worlds […]. It presents, heads-on as it were, what

[76] See further Gunnar Iversen and Scott McKenzie, eds., *Mapping the Rockumentary: Images of Sound and Fury* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).
[77] Altman, *Film Musical*, 287.
[78] Altman, *Film Musical*, 322.
[79] Feuer, *Musical*, 91.
[80] Altman, *Film Musical*, 272.

utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organised."[81] Consequently, it is much more open to transgressing the social and cultural regime of verisimilitude, which ultimately takes us back to the perceived incompatibility of the genre with hegemonic notions of cinematic realism and Carney's fear of the label alienating contemporary young audiences.

As shown above, genres involve specific systems of expectation and hypothesis. In a film musical, "bursting into song is appropriate, therefore probable—therefore intelligible, therefore believable."[82] The film audience's pleasure, however, derives from "repetition and difference,"[83] 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."[84] In Hans Robert Jauss's terms, the horizon of expectations of each film genre expands and changes with every new genre film.

## Film Musical Narrative Strategies in *Once*

*The Importance of Live Performance*

A confessed fan of *An American in Paris* (Minnelli, 1951), *Singin' in the Rain* (Kelly and Donen, 1952), *A Star Is Born* (Cukor, 1954), *Guys and Dolls* (Mankiewicz, 1955), and *New York, New York* (Scorsese, 1977), Carney believes that, although modern film musicals should try to pass themselves off as non-musicals, they should take after these classics and intimately tie the music to the narrative and make the musical numbers move the characters and plot forward.[85] This belief shows throughout *Once.*[86]

Díóg 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

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[81] Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and utopia," in *Only Entertainment*, ed. Richard Dyer, 2nd. ed. (*Movie* no. 24 [1977]; repr., London: Routledge, 2002), 20.
[82] Neale, "Questions," 158.
[83] Steve Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 48.
[84] Neale, "Questions," 165.
[85] See, e.g., "Carney: 'I'll never'"; "Colorful Escapism"; "Interview: John Carney *Begin Again.*"
[86] The only reviewer who disagreed was Jennifer Saeger Killelea of *Film Ireland*, who wrote that "the lyrics provide insight into the main two characters, but without a direct link to the plot at hand" (Jennifer Saeger Killelea, "*Once*," *Film Ireland* 115, March–April 2007, 40).

convey story and plot detail, supported by the visual shifts in space and time."[87] 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 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.[88]

Some of these songs actually grow out of conversations; that is, contrary to what Carney has affirmed, sometimes the characters do break into song. However, since the visual style is documentary, the two leads are musicians, and many songs are played on the guitar that one of them carries around, "the narrative motivations for these musical occasions are clearly justified within the context of the film,"[89] the transitions are generally smooth, and the presence of the musical genre's dual register passes largely unnoticed. Thus, Carney naturalises singing "within the fictive world"[90] by making

> […] musical performances result from the Guy's job as a street musician ("And the Healing Has Begun" and "Say It to Me Now"); from the Guy and Girl's collaborating, writing lyrics, and sharing songs ("Falling Slowly," "If You Want Me," "Lies," and "The Hill"); from a group of friends singing at a party ("Gold"), and from the band rehearsing and ultimately recording a demo tape in a studio ("Trying to Pull Myself Away," "When Your Mind's Made Up," and "You Must Have Fallen from the Sky").
> Moreover, although *Once*'s narrative does not as explicitly precipitate additional songs such as the Guy's "All the Way Down" and "Broken Hearted Hoover Fixer Sucker Guy," the fact that he is a street musician handily explains the presence of these numbers.[91]

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. It seems, then, that what you see in *Once* is indeed very much what you get and, unlike what is conventional in classic musicals, the music never

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[87] O'Connell, *Irish Storytellers*, 176.
[88] O'Connell, *Irish Storytellers*, 176.
[89] Fee, "Musical Dressed Up," 180.
[90] Cohan, "Introduction," 5.
[91] Fee, "Musical Dressed Up," 180.

gets to "move in and out of the storyworlds,"[92] and only production sound is used almost throughout, as Hansard and Carney claimed in promotional interviews.[93] Another contributor to the aura of realism is the absence of theatrical performances; most songs are performed naturalistically on location.

The fact that there are no theatrical performances does not prevent *Once* from sharing with classic musicals a concern for the authenticity of live performance, which is mostly channelled through the very Irish tradition of street busking. When the performance takes place in an open public space, the visuals recreate the POV of an onlooker watching and recording it on a mobile device by means of third-person, handheld, long shots with natural lighting—a narrative strategy that, while being the consequence of having neither time nor money to cut off streets and use paid extras, reproduces the experience of many people at live events in the early twenty-first century, where they often spend more time looking at the screens 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 in *Once* vary; passers-by and traffic often get in the way, and even the performances themselves can break off at any moment.

This is already noticeable in the first scene, which looks as if it was shot on handheld devices by casual bystanders. *Once* opens with a close-up (CU) of a moving van. When it finishes passing by, we see a third-person, wide shot (WS) from across the street of the Guy busking in front of Dunnes Stores, an *Adam and Paul* (Abrahamson, 2004)-like heroin addict (Darren Healy, an actor who specialises in this kind of character) hovering about, singing, clapping, and dancing to the song, traffic going by, and anonymous Dubliners glancing at both as they walk by (figure 1).[94] When the Guy stops playing momentarily to warn the junkie not to try to steal the donations in his guitar case (something that, incidentally, Hansard often suffered as a real-life busker on Grafton Street),[95] the

[92] O'Connell, *Irish Storytellers*, 176.
[93] Nessa Johnston, "The Celtic Tiger 'Unplugged': DV Realism, Liveness and Sonic Authenticity in *Once* (2007)," *The Soundtrack* 7, no. 1 (2014): 26, https://doi.org/10.1386/st.7.1.25_1.
[94] The scene was shot with hidden cameras at 9 a.m. because they did not have permits and also wanted to prevent the formation of a large, view-blocking, funny-acting crowd around Hansard, who is a fairly well-known celebrity in Ireland. Still, some passers-by assumed that he was down on his luck and called in radio shows to explain that he had turned back to busking ("Exclusive: *Once*").
[95] Neal, "Once Upon a Time," 86.

scene cuts to a mid-shot (MS) of him from a different angle. It then returns to the WS and then to the MS before cutting to a very wide shot (VWS) of the street. Returning to the WS, the performance comes to a sudden end when the junkie grabs the guitar case and starts running down the street.

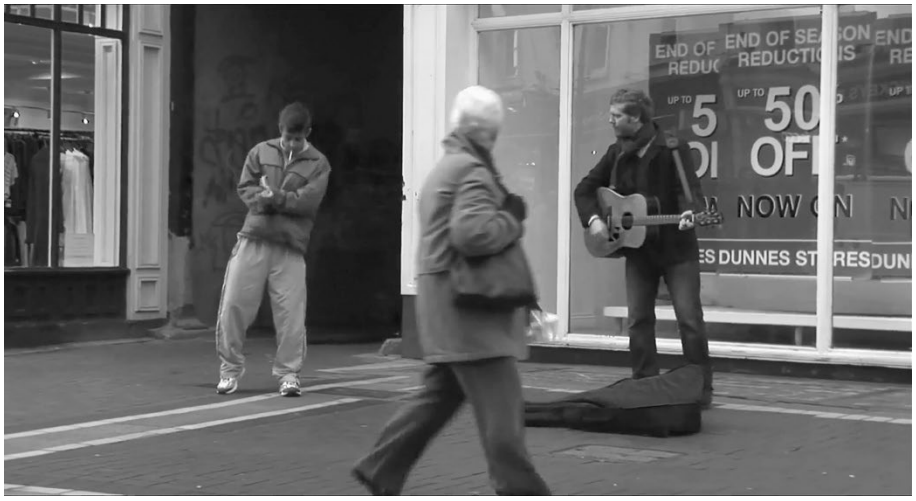


**Figure 1**. *Once*: WS of the Guy, the junkie, and a passer-by in Grafton Street. © 2006 Samson Films, Summit Entertainment, IFB, RTÉ.

*Music as Community-builder*

It could be argued that the song and dance by the junkie and, later, the drunkard and the Hare Krishnas on Grafton Street (9:45) are ironic appropriations of the onlookers who often join the leads' performance in folk musicals. However, another scene later in the film clearly appropriates this trope: the in-house party (47:55–50:42). Shot at Hansard's apartment from the POV of different guests, it presents several postmodern urbanites taking turns singing traditional Irish music. This collective pastime, in which almost everybody is invited to take part—including members of the cult Irish band Interference, who are passed off 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.[96] Equally significant in the scene is the fact that the Girl comes to the party but never gets to sing. Instead, she

[96] Miriam 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, no. 4 [2010]: 433, https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2010.515849). However, Hardiman considers it a nod to international audiences' expectations about cinematic Ireland that, along with the Thin Lizzy tribute band and the Guy's final act of emigration, takes away from the film's authenticity (Hardiman, "Twice," 84–85).

remains in the background as a passive onlooker, uncomfortably reminding viewers of the invisibility of immigrants and immigrant cultures in contemporary Ireland and somewhat prefiguring the narrative's ending: She, like her mother and *Fair City*-loving immigrant neighbours on Mountjoy Square, does not yet fully belong in her adopted country, and perhaps never will, as there seems to be an invisible barrier setting her apart from the native Irish that not even music can overcome.

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. This 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 people and the tensions arising from them are mostly social constructs. Overall, musicals would propose that if the integration of different musical traditions and performing styles into a 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 characterised—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 young child, and lives with her mother in an apartment in central Dublin. He is cynical and reluctant to emigrate and take risks; she is a bit of a dreamer and has already taken a huge 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 classically trained pianist.

It is a shared love of music that kickstarts a relationship between them, who then also find in music an effective vehicle for bridging cultural differences and allowing them to 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."[97] 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 that 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 classic backstage musicals, what the viewer gets at the end of *Once* is a recording weekend that, despite achieving its aim, is no guarantee of anything for the Guy's career. Neither does the duo stay together once the demo tape has been recorded, which certainly defies "the Hollywood and Bakhtinian approach to romance" but is not "an unfamiliar device of the musical,"[98] as seen in films such as *Cabaret* (Fosse, 1972), *Nashville*, *All That Jazz* (Fosse, 1979), or more recently *La La Land* (Chazelle, 2016). At the end of *Once,* he returns to an Irish girlfriend and she to a Czech husband—a closing reflection on the unlikelihood of a melting pot in Ireland and, therefore, an eventual US-like assimilation of immigrants into the Irish mainstream.[99]

Leaving aside such political readings, the ending should not come as unexpected to the attentive viewer. Nessa Hardiman argues that Carney makes his protagonists develop their romance through music, that the recording of the demo tape both consummates and climaxes the romance, and that when "the love affair has been consummated in audio terms, there is nothing left for the lovers to do."[100] By contrast, Matthew J. Fee aptly proposes that the Guy and the Girl "sing of heterosexual romance" through the narrative, yet most of the songs articulate feelings for their estranged partners rather than for one another. Thus, for instance, while the Guy's "Lies" and "All the Way Down" focus on his ex-girlfriend, "the Girl's performances of 'If You Want Me' and 'The Hill' invoke her feelings towards her distant, older husband."[101] Furthermore, Fee notes that the Guy's decision to go to London follows his rendition of "Lies," and the Girl's to call her husband and try to fix her marriage hers of "The Hill," leading him to conclude that "music in *Once* precipitates the failure, and not the

[97] Altman, *Film Musical*, 126.
[98] O'Connell, *Irish Storytellers*, 176–77.
[99] In this vein, Tony 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]: 217, https://www.estudiosirlandeses.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Film_Reviews_2007.pdf).
[100] Hardiman, "Twice," 87–88.
[101] Fee, "Musical Dressed Up," 178.

success of the lead couple's potential romance."[102] Obviously, the main exception to this would be "Falling Slowly," which we discuss in detail below, but which for Fee also "sounds a regretful note about the impossibility of their relationship, a fact compounded by its reprise as the non-diegetic closing to the film."[103]

*Music as a Tool for Individual Empowerment*

Despite *Once*'s bittersweet ending and real locations, 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 idealise her Dublin surroundings. Furthermore, music lights the film's complex, "authentically Irish world of marginalised, peripheral characters"[104] with a spark of quiet optimism that eschews the "hip hedonism" and cynicism of Dublin-set rom-coms and thrillers from the late 1990s and early 2000s (e.g., *About Adam* [Stembridge, 2000], *Goldfish Memory* [Gill, 2003]), the gloom of other recent Irish films focused on the local underclass (e.g., *Adam and Paul*, *Pavee Lackeen: The Traveller Girl* (Ogden, 2005)], and even the overwhelming discomfort of Carney's trauma dramas *November Afternoon*, *Park*, and *On the Edge*.[105]

That music can transform reality is first suggested in the night exterior scene in which the Guy and the Girl meet each other for the first time (3:45–8:10). The scene begins with a slightly low-angle WS of the Guy playing "Say It to Me Now" to an empty Grafton Street, closing in to an MS as the performance becomes more intense and moving from the casual on-looker POV used in the opening number "to something more akin to a rock video"[106] (figure 2). When the song finishes, the camera pulls back to reveal that the sequence shot we have just seen was subjective—it showed the Girl's POV and the street was not that empty, but music led her to create an idealised, unreal space

[102] Fee, "Musical Dressed Up," 179.
[103] Fee, "Musical Dressed Up," 179.
[104] Hardiman, "Twice," 83.
[105] See further Barton, *Irish Cinema,* 197, 206–207, 211–13; Fee, "Musical Dressed Up," 184–85; Martin McLoone, *Film, Media and Popular Culture in Ireland: Cityscapes, Landscapes, Soundscapes* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), 37–50.
[106] Mac Cárthaigh, "From the Heart," 13.

inhabited only by the Guy. Moreover, 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 soundtrack, highlighting the subjective character of the visuals and the fact that, regardless of Hansard and Carney's claims, there is indeed a wealth of post-synchronised, carefully edited sound in *Once.* In other words, although the transition from the real to the musical reality and back again is as visually and aurally cued as in any Hollywood musical, Carney uses camera movement, framing, and sound mixing to reverse the genre's conventional movement between narrative and performance: Rather than "expand out into 'unreal' and 'impossible' realms and perspectives" from the film's narrative reality, he "mov[es] into [and focuses in on] the performances and then ultimately mov[es] out of them in order to return us to a story very clearly located in contemporary Dublin."[107]

In line with this, documentary realism returns to the storyworld when "Say It to Me Now" is over. A brief conversation between the Guy and the Girl follows, which is covered by conventional over-the-shoulder (OTS) shots edited in shot-reverse-shot (figure 2). As a consequence of the difference in height between the actors, the viewer sees her in slightly high-angle, mid, and close shots that, along with her accent, age, features, 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. The second encounter (9:57–25:00), however, shatters these expectations and reconstructs her as a highly resilient individual and gifted musician who the Guy comes to admire and consider a partner, musical and romantic, during the climactic scene at the now closed Waltons Music store on South Great George's Street (12:11–20:12).

[107] Fee, "Musical Dressed Up," 182.

**Figure 2.** *Once*: POV shots in the first encounter scene. © 2006 Samson Films, Summit Entertainment, IFB, RTÉ.

The sequence begins with the pair meeting again on Grafton Street. Building on the expectations created by the previous encounter, she enters the scene wearing the same clothes from the night before and towing along the broken sledge vacuum cleaner she said she would bring for him to repair. However, as soon as they start conversing, the shot-reverse-shot editing and OTS shots are largely abandoned in favour of the two-shot. This type of shot, which dominates the visuals for the rest of the film, allows Carney 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, since the dialogue can be filmed and edited using fewer setups and shots. It also gives the viewer a sense of voyeuristic intimacy with the characters, which in *Once* is also reinforced by the periodic use of long lenses and shots through windows—necessary to make the non-authorised shooting pass as unnoticed as possible in the streets of Dublin and minimise the repetition of takes by liberating the inexperienced lead actors from the pressure of a constantly close camera.

As the encounter marks the true beginning of the friendship/romance between the characters, it feels only natural that the director switches to the two-shot. In line with the above, 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 have lunch. Furthermore, they are shown seated at a table, which largely neutralises 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 street vendor—she is a Czech classical pianist who experienced her father's suicide before moving to Ireland.

**Figure 3**. *Once*: Shot through the window of Simon's Place Coffee Shop. © 2006 Samson Films, Summit Entertainment, IFB, RTÉ.

A lesson in film economy, except for a cutaway of the shop owner, the scene at the back of Waltons that climaxes the sequence seems to have been entirely crafted out of just two handheld master reverse angle two-shots from each side of a display piano and plenty of camera movement (figure 4).

**Figure 4**. *Once*: Master reverse angle two-shots for the Waltons Music scene. © 2006 Samson Films, Summit Entertainment, IFB, RTÉ.

Inspired by the first real-life musical encounter between Hansard and Irglova and Carney's own experiences at Waltons as a teenager, 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.[108] 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 MS of the Guy, where the conventional meaning of the low-angle shot—evoking power and strength—is undermined by the actor's ecstatic, humbled look as she plays the piano. Increasingly moved as the performance progresses, he squats down beside her. The camera tilts down with him, which reframes the shot to pick up the Girl in the foreground and makes him 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 that her musical skills have just brought about is furthered by his lack of knowledge of classical 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.
> GIRL: It's good, yes.

When she asks him to play her one of his songs, the scene cuts to a reverse two-shot. The Guy then goes off-screen for a second to get a stool to sit on, which puts him at the same height as her and further expresses visually what his character and the viewer have just discovered: She is his artistic equal, if not his superior, and, therefore, has the same "power within this narrative world," which for Hardiman is in turn essential for the "sense of unalloyed optimism which determines the tone of the film" and keeps it away from the cynicism of the turn-of-the-century Irish rom-com.[109] It should also be noted that, while verbal language generally acts as a barrier between people, Czech also serves later in the narrative to reaffirm her cultural superiority: Whereas she speaks English quite well, neither the Guy nor the vast majority of the English-speaking audience understands her native tongue,

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[108] When he was a teenager, Carney taught himself to play the bass on the display guitars at Waltons, using the excuse that he was saving for one and wanted to be sure about which one to buy ("Newest Stealth Musical," 7:25–8:00). More importantly, the scene attempts to recreate the (magical) moment when Hansard, while staying for the first time with the Irglovas, tried out "one of his new songs on [the then 13-year-old Marketa], and she immediately suggested a harmony part" (Neal, "Once Upon a Time," 84).
[109] Hardiman, "Twice," 84.

which Carney highlights by not providing subtitles for the occasional Czech dialogue throughout the film, including that in which she confesses her love to him.

As a result of its mise-en-scène, the scene at Waltons 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.[110] In fact, the performance reaches an almost sexual climax in the two CUs (figure 5) where they sing the chorus together one last time:

> 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
> I'll sing along

**Figure 5**. *Once*: CUs at the end of "Falling Slowly." © 2006 Samson Films, Summit Entertainment, IFB, RTÉ.

Unlike verbal language, which creates a barrier between immigrant and native citizens, music is a universal language that blurs the opposition and entitles the Girl to a "voice" and a "choice" in her adopted country. As Miriam 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 voice."[111] That is, a new (artistic) community

[110] As Carney himself has said, while writing *Once*, he was "also interested in the idea of language and trying to communicate without the use necessarily of your first language. It struck me as interesting the way that musicians communicate through music" ("Carney Talks about Hit Film *Once*").
[111] Mara, "Just this *Once*," 433.

and a better, more solid work of art are born out of the collaborative, intimate encounter between these two seemingly different people with contrasting musical backgrounds.

Right after the last chorus, a high-angle pullback shot of the Guy and the Girl playing cuts away to the shop owner enjoying the music at the front counter—a sort of third-person narrator audience reaction shot that subtly reminds us that, like him, we have just been allowed to voyeuristically share in a private moment. Although the scene finishes with one last two-shot of them at the back of Waltons, an instrumental version of "Falling Slowly" continues on the soundtrack through the next two scenes, in which they are shown crossing George's Street Arcade and sitting at the back of a double-decker bus, before fading out when they start talking again (20:32).

*Music as a Connector of Time/Reality Levels*

"Falling Slowly" is not the only song that starts out as diegetic music, 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, where the characters are shown doing different things at different times and places. In fact, most of the songs in the film adhere to this pattern, which helps the narrative to transition seamlessly between scenes, between music and dialogue, between the diegetic and the music track, between location and post-synchronised sound, and between different levels of time and reality.

As said above, Hansard and Carney claimed that *Once* relies almost exclusively on synchronised recorded sound and that, as a consequence, documentary authenticity reigns supreme.[112] Their claim is, however, at best ambiguous. First, although the songs are mostly performed in empty, quiet places, the *complete* absence of ambience while they are being played indicates that at least some of them must have been post-synchronised. 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-synchronised. In other words, "looked at from the point of view of source and motivation it belongs to

[112] The only acknowledged exception to this would be the "If You Want Me" scene ("Carney and Cast").

the diegetic track, but seen from the standpoint of actual production and general effect it seems to belong to the musical track."[113]

Even if the performances relied on location sound only, it is clear that to use this sound in a different scene from the one in which it was synchronically recorded, it has to be post-synchronised. In certain 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/or voices are added to the songs when they pass to the music track. Finally, it should also be noted that the director resorts to a clever strategy of reusing music across scenes while maintaining its diegetic quality: In certain scenes, the characters record songs that are later played on an on-screen cassette 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 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 level adjustments that Eamon (Geoff Minogue) is shown performing, give away the use of post-synchronised sound. Subsequently, 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 hear is the same high-quality version of "When Your Mind Is Made Up" as before. This time, however, no real attempt is made to conceal the unrealistic, post-synchronised nature of the sound: Once the song starts playing, all other sounds are muted, and the synchrony between image and sound is broken. The characters are shown conversing in the car and then clowning around on the Dollymount Strand beach, yet 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."

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[113] Altman, *Film Musical*, 64.

A greater level of complexity is attempted with the other song recorded 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.[114] Once more, a post-synchronised, 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 playing the instruments and singing the lyrics in synchrony with the soundtrack. All the other shots, including many of the recording itself, are characterised by an evident lack of synchrony between sound and image, which clearly points in the direction of post-synchronised sound. As with most songs in the film, "Fallen from the Sky" continues into the following scene, where it rather unexpectedly comes full circle and is repositioned as location sound, supposedly coming from the on-screen mixing deck around which the characters have been sitting at 4 a.m. to review the session'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 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."[115] It seems hardly casual, then, that the scenes in the montages are dominated by an overwhelming sense of joy and playfulness, quite in line with the romanticizing memory that Altman mentions and different from the atmosphere of exhaustion 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).[116] O'Connell argues that the scene operates as a music video-cum-flashback in which "the grainy-documentary feel of the home-movie footage alongside the

[114] The song has overtones of The Cure's "Close to Me," the music video of which is among Carney's favourites (see "*Sing Street*, Nostalgia, and the Coming-of-Age Film (Sub)genre" in chapter 4).
[115] Altman, *Film Musical*, 74.
[116] Plunkett is Carney's partner in real life. The amateur video on the Guy's laptop overlaps actual footage of their relationship and fictional shots ("Carney and Cast").

performance of a whole song allows the narrative to stretch the fictional potential in an interesting and innovative way."[117] 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 Guy's suburban living room. In turn, this reinforces the opposition between the happy yet rather unreal and distant past and the heartbroken yet real and tangible present that the song connects. It should be added that, despite its diegetic appearance, "Lies" soon passes to the music track, with the sounds of a violin, a piano, and a female voice—Catherine's?—added 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 shown in the home-video footage with a layer of dark irony that further questions their objectivity.

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 "All the Way Down" in his room (8:12–10:12). Although the scene is visually much simpler, Carney manages to effectively create a flashback merely by inserting a CU 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 dialling a number and, after a few tones, hear her voicemail greeting. The director cleverly anchors the meaning of the insert by cutting to the picture exactly when the voicemail greeting starts to play on the other side of the line.[118] 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, re-establishing the initial synchrony between music and image and, therefore, the appearance of location sound. "All the Way 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 of the Guy's morning busking on Grafton Street. As in the scenes just examined, the Guy can be seen playing different

[117] O'Connell, *Irish Storytellers*, 176.
[118] On *anchoring*, see Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 274–76.

songs, although the diegetic track is muted and the only sound we hear is "All the Way Down," which again highlights the post-synchronised 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."[119] In the scenes above, some shots are ascribed to the happier past that the Guy is torn between getting back to and getting over, whereas others are presented as part of his diegetic present. Rather than help him escape or transform his 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 remain unresolved. 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 and the picture taken back then or the embittered, present-day lyrics that, as if they were a voiceover, comment on them and question their veracity.

A 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":[120] the exterior night scene where the Girl walks down the streets of Dublin in her pyjamas, while singing out loud the lyrics she has just written to accompany the Guy's melody for "If You Want Me" (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 the portable CD player she's borrowed from the Guy is fully replaced with two post-synchronised tracks: the (diegetic) lyrics she is singing and the (largely non-diegetic) instrumental track to which she is supposedly listening on the player. Unreal and oneiric, the scene shows a young foreign woman in her pyjamas walking alone at night, sometimes in almost total darkness, in an unsafe area of Dublin, while headlights of cars with unknown occupants pass her by (figure 6). The Girl, however, remains immersed in music throughout the scene, oblivious to and unafraid of her ominous surroundings.

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[119] Altman, *Film Musical*, 74.
[120] "Interview with *Once* Director John Carney: Part 1," interview by Janaki Cedanna, *Janaki's Musings*, May 30, 2007, video, https://web.archive.org/web/20131018092315/blip.tv/janakis-musings/interview-with-once-director-john-carney-part-1-251984.

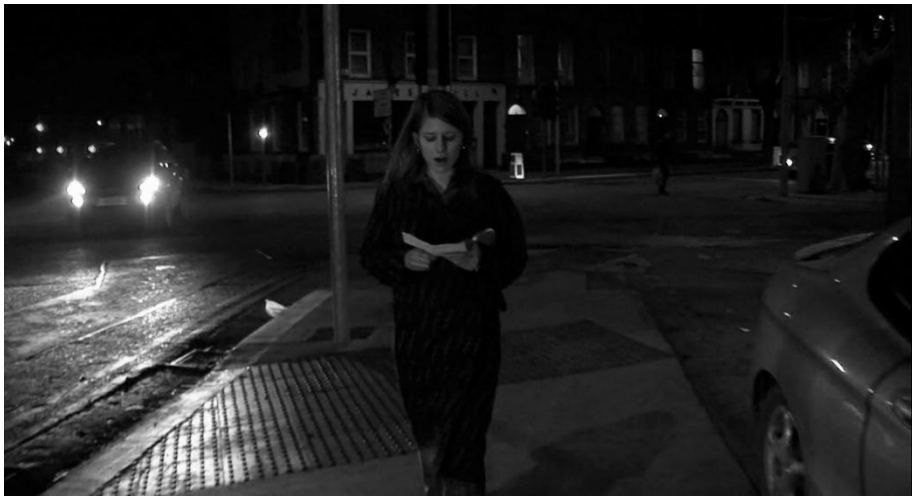

**Figure 6**. *Once*: tracking shot of the Girl walking alone at night in Dublin. © 2006 Samson Films, Summit Entertainment, IFB, RTÉ.

If this were a horror film, we would say that the character starts singing to try to allay her fears 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. On the contrary, the suave, ethereal music and lyrics transform the diegetic northern inner-city Dublin into a non-threatening, tranquil, almost romantic space over which the Girl seems to be fully in control. In other words, by raising her newfound "hopeful voice" on her own for the first time, she manages to escape and transform her reality and, more importantly, to somehow transcend the private sphere and make the streets of Dublin her own. It should also be noted that she first sings alone in an open public space on a deserted street at night—that is, in an open public space that, by its very emptiness and darkness, becomes almost private.

The native Guy busks day and night on Grafton Street, the very commercial centre of Dublin, and makes some money from his talent, whereas the immigrant Girl is not so lucky. The Guy may occupy a liminal position in the Irish public sphere, but this position is shown to be much closer to the centre than that of the Girl, who gets to sing in an open public space 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 must relegate herself to the role of the unskilled immigrant worker that Irish capitalism expects her to occupy. When private spaces become public, she again 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 piano while they are recording with the band; she only truly 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 and is in practice a private space.

Altman argues that "in the folk musical […] woman is the source of life—the land, the 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."[121] The immigrant Girl may be ultimately denied a proper artistic place in the Irish public sphere, but it is she who first recognises the Guy's composing talent and encourages him to develop it. It is she who improves "Falling Slowly" and adds lyrics to his unfinished version of "If You Want Me." It is she who brokers the deals with the studio owner and the bank manager that make the professional recording of the demo tape possible and helps the Guy convince the street musicians to participate in the recording session. And it is she who ultimately provides the drive for him to go to London and try to win his girlfriend back.

While the successful recording of the demo tape climaxes the show musical and, according to Hardiman, the romance subplot, 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, reunited with her Czech husband, takes delivery of and starts playing the piano that 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.

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[121] Altman, *Film Musical*, 317.

## 3. *Begin Again* (2013): The Remake That Pretended It Wasn't a Remake

> […] in all those high-power Hollywood meetings where it's all about box office[,] the filmmaker has to be privately thinking, "Yeah, but how's this going to seem to my great grandchildren? Are they going to say that my great grandfather was an awful charlatan? And a sell-out? Or are they going to say he made good stuff?"[1]

Allegedly inspired by *A Star Is Born* and *Guys and Dolls*, Carney's dealings with the music industry while he was in The Frames, and the relationship between Hansard and Irglova, *Begin Again* somehow picks up where *Once* leaves off. On the one hand, it focuses on what happens after a musician lands a record deal, as the Guy hoped to find in London at the end of *Once*. On the other hand, if *Once* is an artistic reflection on the anxieties that the filmmaker was facing in 2005 while also touching on social change in Celtic Tiger Ireland, *Begin Again* addresses the anxieties that his rise to global fame in 2007–2008 brought about, while also obliquely touching on the return of mass migration from Ireland to the United States in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. More specifically, *Begin Again* would deal with Carney's—and the Irish(-American)—fear of not being able to handle success and turning into a sell-out and an asshole,[2] especially since in Ireland "it often feels like there's just the one spot for success," and fame can be really testing.[3]

Conceived in the aftermath of the success of *Once*, *Begin Again* was, however, postponed because the filmmaker was developing other projects and, besides, he did not want the two musicals "to be too close together."[4] It was not until 2010 that he first pitched the storyline to Judd Apatow, who liked it instantly and asked him to turn it into a feature-length script. After months of development discussions and rewrites, the script—then entitled *Can a Song Save Your Life?*—was considered finished. Apatow agreed to produce through Apatow Productions with Anthony Bregman of Likely Story and Tobin Armbrust of Exclusive Media, and most of the about $9 (€8.3) million budget was secured from the partnership. After one more year of pre-production, shooting began in NYC on June 29, 2012 (that is, just a few days after the Broadway version of *Once* garnered eight

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[1] "John Carney interview."
[2] See, e.g., Maureen Dezell, *Irish America: Coming into Clover* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 1–14.
[3] "Carney goes urban."
[4] "Carney goes urban."

Tony awards), and principal photography was completed on August 6. One year later, *Can a Song Save Your Life?* was deemed ready for release, and the premiere was set for September 7, 2013 at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), one of the festivals that had turned down *Once* in 2006.

The film is about Gretta (Keira Knightley), a British singer-songwriter who moves to NYC with her American musician boyfriend Dave (Adam Levine) after he finds success with a few songs on a hit soundtrack and is signed by a record company. They arrive in NYC as both a creative team and lovers, but the company quickly pushes her away to focus only on him. They break up after he cheats on her with a member of his entourage, and she moves temporarily in with Steve (James Corden), a British expat busker friend. One evening, shortly before she is scheduled to return home, Steve encourages Gretta to go out and have some fun singing at an open-mic night. Her performance is accidentally caught by Dan Mulligan (Mark Ruffalo), a drunken, down-and-out music executive who has just been fired from the label he co-founded, and who is estranged from his unfaithful wife, Miriam Hart (Catherine Keener) and rebellious teenage daughter, Violet (Hailee Steinfeld). Dan believes that Gretta is so talented that she will get him his old job back if he is able to convince her to sign with the company. Even though she is sceptical of her talent and uninterested in stardom, they visit Dan's former business partner Saul (Yasiin Bey), who is not enthused over Gretta's tunes and refuses to produce even a demo album. Determined to make one regardless, Dan assembles a music team out of a few amateur gifted instrumentalists, Violet, Steve, and a couple of professional session musicians recommended and funded by one of his past discoveries, the rapper Troublegum (CeeLo Green), and sets out to record the demo on the streets of NYC. Gretta and Dan grow fond of each other while making the album, but they never go beyond friendship. Dan progressively patches things up with his wife and daughter. Gretta tries to do the same with Dave, but finds herself even more disappointed in him when she learns that he is advancing his career using a produced version of a song she composed for him as a personal Christmas gift. Gretta's demo impresses Saul, who agrees to reinstate Dan and offers her a contract. However, after seeing Dave play her song for hundreds of fans, Gretta turns down the offer and asks Dan for permission to sell the album independently online for a symbolic price of one dollar. Aided by a tweet by Troublegum, the album is downloaded 10,000 times on the first day alone.

The distributors at TIFF loved *Can a Song Save Your Life?* and immediately started a bidding war for the US rights to the film, which Harvey Weinstein eventually won for The Weinstein Company (TWC) through preying tactics. Long upset by the mistake he had made by passing on *Once*, he showed up before anyone else at the tapas restaurant where the after-show party was due to be held. When Carney arrived, he cut off everybody else from talking to him for a straight 90 minutes and made him an offer no one could refuse: He would pay $7 (€6.5) million for distribution and commit a further $20 (€18.5) million to promotion—by all means exorbitant sums for an indie production, which the NYC mogul would later justify based on his falling for its portrait of his hometown.[5] Be that as it may, Weinstein is rumoured to have demanded certain narrative "adjustments" be made and the title changed to *Begin Again*, as he found *Can a Song Save Your Life?* difficult to remember by audiences.[6]

After a festival run, *Begin Again* went into limited release on June 27, 2014, in the United States and on July 11 in the United Kingdom and Ireland. It was re-released two months later to better the prospects for awards. By that time, it had been seven years since the success of *Once*, but Carney was still largely the guy who did the "*Once* thing," the indie film musical for which he had managed to find an audience by twisting certain conventions of the genre in the narrative and being deliberately ambiguous during the film's promotion about its generic ascription and the degree of professionalism involved in its production.

This chapter proposes that *Begin Again* is a remake of *Once* that was instead marketed as if it were an original film. The hypothesis is first supported by an analysis of promotional materials and activities (especially the film poster) and critical reviews, and then a formal and narrative reading of

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[5] See, e.g., Brent Lang, "Keira Knightley Says *Begin Again* Was Welcome Break from Dying on Screen," *Variety*, June 26, 2014, https://variety.com/2014/scene/news/keira-knightley-begin-again-welcome-break-from-dying-1201251111/#!; "Director John Carney Considered Casting Adele in *Begin Again*," interview by Ramin Setoodeh, *Variety*, June 25, 2014, https://variety.com/2014/film/news/john-carney-begin-again-1201246811/#!; John Meagher, "'He gave off this sense that he could make things happen for people,'" *Irish Independent*, October 15, 2017, https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/movies/he-gave-off-this-sense-that-he-could-make-things-happen-for-people-36222380.html.

[6] According to Knightley, however, the title had to be changed because test audiences were upset by it. Neither Carney nor Apatow enthused over the new title, but they were savvy enough not to openly stand up to Weinstein and instead went for a subtle, tongue-in-cheek approach to vent their frustration publicly. See "Carney Considered Casting Adele"; "Keira Knightley interviewed by Simon Mayo," interview by Simon Mayo, Kermode and Mayo's Film Review, *BBC Radio 5*, July 11, 2014, audio, 1:00–1:35, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p022p04k; Lang, "Keira Knightley Says."

the film itself. From the former emerges that the fact that *Begin Again* was essentially a remake of *Once* was concealed during promotion, which instead focused on positioning it as another authentic film musical by John Carney, a Keira Knightley vehicle, and/or an opposites-attract romantic comedy (rom-com) bearing a resemblance to *Once.* The latter allows us to contend that, as many critics maintained upon the film's release, *Begin Again* should be considered an unacknowledged remake of *Once*: Not only does it share the same basic storyline of *Once*, it also contains a significant number of scenes and narrative strategies that can be effortlessly traced back to Carney's previous musical.

## Film Marketing vs. Film Criticism: From Original Film Musical to (Star-Driven) Remake

For over a century, the film industry has strived to attract audiences into cinemas with movies that combine recognisable and novel elements. Whereas the latter exploit the human appetite for novelty and the fear of being left out, the former have to do with the pleasures of recognition, repetition, and nostalgia. Consequently, adaptations, prequels, sequels, remakes, and reboots make up much of the global cinematic landscape, whereas the originality of original films is usually toned down by establishing continuities with previous film productions and other intellectual properties through genres, adaptations, remakes, and star power.

As seen in the previous chapter, *Once* was initially marketed as an indie romance, mainly because Carney feared that the label *musical* could hamper its box office prospects. This was not the case with *Begin Again*, which following another Altman precedent[7] was announced as the new film musical by John Carney when pre-production commenced and has since remained primarily ascribed to the genre, even though *romantic comedy*, *dramedy*, and *romance* usually follow *musical* in summaries and reviews. This does not mean, however, that the marketing department at TWC or Carney himself were any less willing to conceal or at least downplay fundamental traits of *Begin Again* during promotion. On this occasion, although it was openly acknowledged that *Begin Again* was a musical, and *Once* was often alluded to in the publicity, the fact that *Begin Again* is a remake of

[7] *A Perfect Couple* (1979), Altman's first musical after *Nashville*, was marketed as a contemporary musical, although it was not very different formally from the 1975 film (Magee, "Robert Altman," 157–59).

*Once* was left out of the marketing campaign and replaced with an almost obsessive insistence on authenticity as the main nexus between two films said to be similar yet not identical.

Given that the promoters themselves put *Once* on the agenda, we cannot honestly tell what they were expecting to achieve by not admitting that *Begin Again* was a reimagining of the Irish film. Perhaps they just wanted to wait for the press to generate consensus and then benefit from it, as had occurred with the generic ascription of *Once.* Perhaps they feared that since the stage version of *Once* was still running and still so popular, a third, Hollywood-produced version of the same story could be seen as unnecessary and alienate its primary target audience (i.e., the *Once* fanbase), who could also regard Carney's decision to helm it as a deviation from his previous work. Or perhaps they were just afraid that the negative critical reaction that Hollywood remakes of independent and foreign films usually receive could alienate *both* the *Once* fanbase and the broader mainstream audiences that it also needed to cross over if it was to stand a chance of recouping the $29 (€26.8) million invested in it. Whatever the reason, *Begin Again* was not marketed as a remake of *Once* but—depending on the audience segment targeted by the promotional material or activity in question—as the new (musical) film by John Carney, a rom-com, a Keira Knightley star vehicle, a film bearing a passing resemblance to *Once*, or, as is the case for the film poster, all of these at the same time.[8]

As John Durie points out, the aim of film marketing is "the maximisation of the audience for a film resulting in expanding its earning potential."[9] Conventional film marketing materials include trailers, merchandise, electronic press kits, stills, and posters. According to Finola Kerrigan, they are all produced to

> […] position the film in the minds of the target audience, communicate the key benefit which they will receive from consuming the film, and differentiate it from competitors. […] While it is important that these materials do not just reflect a film, the marketing materials should be developed in order to present the film in an attractive way so that the target consumer develops 'want to see.' However, due to the power of word of mouth in film marketing, it is important to position the film correctly and to communicate the unique selling proposition so that the consumer expectations are set accordingly.[10]

[8] See, e.g., "Interview: John Carney *Begin Again*"; "Meet John Carney."
[9] John Durie (ed.), *The Film Marketing Handbook: A Practical Guide to Marketing Strategies for Independent Films* (Madrid: MEDIA Business School, 1993), 13, quoted in Kerrigan, *Film Marketing*, 37.
[10] Kerrigan, *Film Marketing*, 129.

All materials are important, but the poster still holds a central place in film marketing.[11] Following Jonathan Schroder (and, implicitly, Stuart Hall),[12] Kerrigan notes that to fulfil their objective, film posters should rarely deviate from established visual conventions; otherwise, the consumer may be unable to decode the message and be "left in a state of confusion regarding the benefits which may be derived through consuming the film."[13] To prevent this from happening, Robert Marich

> […] provides a list of questions to be asked when starting to design the poster image. Firstly, are there well-known stars and will the audience for these actors or director go to see a film on its opening weekend? […] Is the story interesting and original? In terms of the target audience, is it an art house audience where the critics are seen as an important element in decision making or the youth audience which is portrayed as immune to critical reviews? Does the title clearly communicate the essence of a film? […] If the title is less indicative of the content of the film, […] the marketing materials must somehow indicate what the film is about. Is there a central character that the audience will relate to or take an interest in? […] [The film poster designers also] need to identify sub-plots which can have appeal for broader audiences.[14]

While certain features of the credits on a film poster must abide by industry regulations, others are the result of negotiation between producers and agents over who wields the most star power and/or who can draw more viewers into cinemas. Film stars may be granted the right to approve or veto any image intended for the poster and have their name written in a certain size "in relation to the film title, the other actors or director or other key elements" and positioned in a specific place.[15] Given the association between leadership and upper-left positioning, stars often demand to be billed in the upper-left corner and in as large a font size as possible, which is otherwise assigned by default to the lead(s), director, and/or producer.[16] As we discuss below, it should also be noted that "the director, or in some cases the producer, cinematographer or other members of the creative team may play a similar role to that attributed to the actors as stars," that is, they may act as cue for certain, usually

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[11] Kerrigan, *Film Marketing*, 133.
[12] See Jonathan Schroder, *Visual Consumption* (London: Routledge, 2002).
[13] Kerrigan, *Film Marketing*, 130.
[14] Robert Marich, *Marketing to Moviegoers. A Handbook of Strategies and Tactics* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2005), 14, quoted in Kerrigan, *Film Marketing*, 130–31.
[15] Kerrigan, *Film Marketing*, 132.
[16] Maria Paola Paladino et al., "Up-and-left as a spatial cue of leadership," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 56, no. 3 (2017): 599–608, https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12179.

more sophisticated audiences and, accordingly, have their own demands with regard to poster design.[17]

The poster used to advertise *Begin Again* in the United States and most international markets aims to maximise audience appeal by setting different expectations depending on the consumer's knowledge of *Once* and its poster. Thus, it seems primarily designed to address the *Once* fanbase and tell them that *Once* and *Begin Again* are indeed similar, yet not identical, films, and that if they liked the former, they will also like the latter. In fact, when the two posters are placed side by side (figure 7), the first thing that strikes the viewer is how remarkably similar the compositions are. They are both dominated by a long frontal shot of a scruffy, stubbled man in his late thirties or forties, and a younger, delicate-featured, shorter woman looking sideways at each other against a blurry yet identifiable sunlit urban background. The scene is completed by a guitar case and a much larger object that extends into the background, frames the composition, and directs the viewer's gaze to the characters. The film title is placed in the lower central part of the image, below and between the two characters.

[17] Kerrigan, *Film Marketing*, 82, 90.

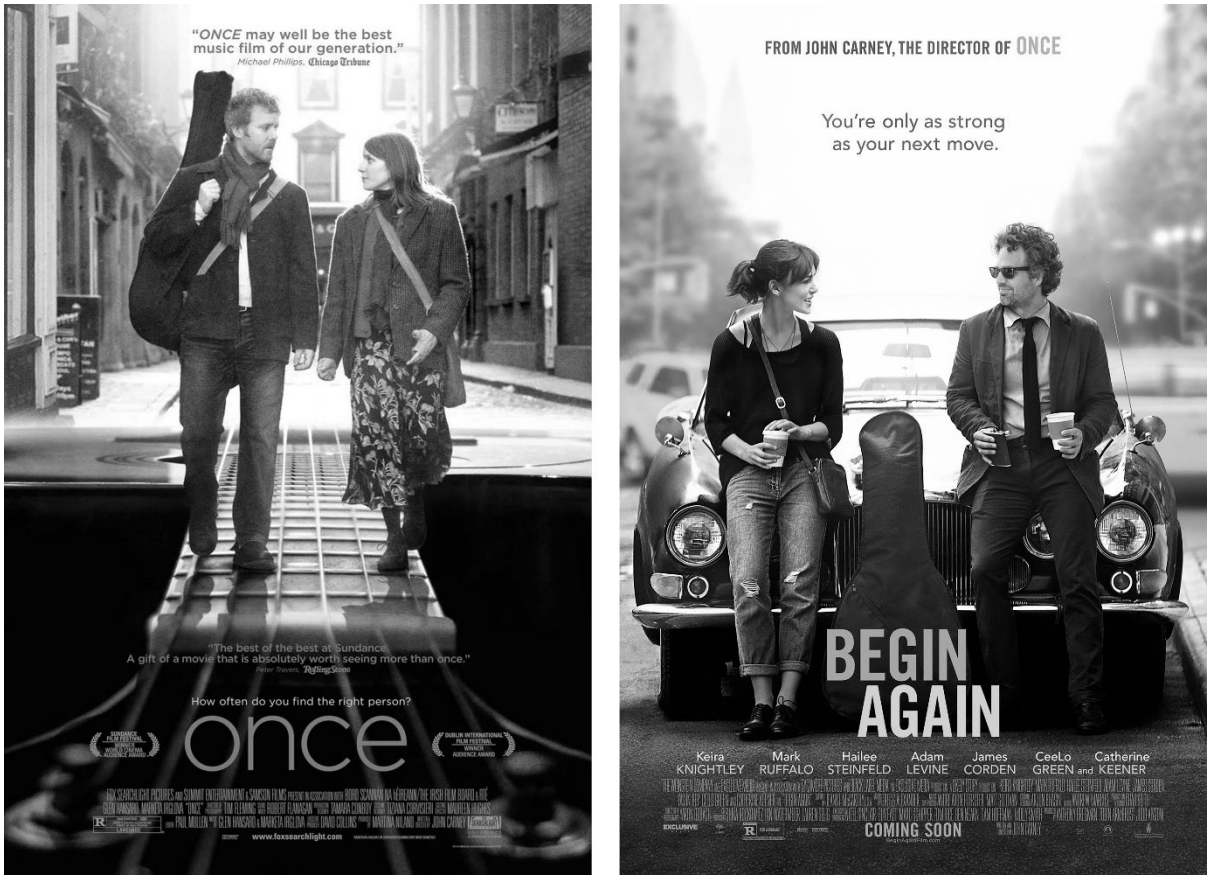


**Figure 7**. Posters for *Once* and *Begin Again*, Alamy. © 2006 Samson Films, Summit Entertainment, IFB, RTÉ; © 2013 Exclusive Media, Sycamore Pictures, Apatow Productions, Likely Story, Formatted Films.

Despite a few differences, none is substantial. The title is capitalised, yellow, and blue in the *Begin Again* poster, and lower-case and red in the other. The much larger object is a guitar seen in low angle in the *Once* poster and the front of a 1960s Jaguar Mark X in the other. The guitar case, which helps place both films within the musical genre, is on the man's back in one and between the characters in the other. The couple is leaning on the bonnet of the car in the *Begin Again* poster and walking on the guitar neck in the other. One man is to the right, wearing shades, a tie, and a blazer and about to lace a take-away cup of coffee, and the other is on the left, wearing a scarf and a jacket. One is red-haired; the other is dark-haired. The woman in the *Begin Again* poster is to the left, wearing torn-up jeans, a plain black top, and flats, holding a take-away cup of coffee. She is also carrying a purse with the strap crossed from left to right and has her hair up in a ponytail. The woman in the *Once* poster is carrying a purse with the strap crossed from right to left. Her hair is straight, and she is

wearing a patterned skirt, boots, and fingerless mittens. The background image is Grafton Street in Dublin in one poster and Central Park in NYC in the other.

If the consumer happens to be familiar with *Once* but not with its poster, the connection between the films is made explicit in the *Begin Again* poster with the line "From John Carney, the director of *Once.*" Written in a larger font than the other cast and crew billed and positioned at the top, the reference strengthens the appeal to the "cine-sophisticated audiences" that enjoyed *Once* by signalling Carney's star (i.e., auteur) status and setting expectations of continuity in directorial style.[18] Arguably, the title itself can also be said to be evocative of the connection, as nothing can begin *again* unless it has been done at least *once* before. Beginning again can also be associated with finding renewal by going back to one's origins, retracing one's steps, and doing the right things—in this specific case, going back to the type of film, genre, and story that Carney had abandoned to make *Zonad* and *The Rafters*, with poor commercial and critical results.

To mass audiences unable to decode the allusions to *Once*, the poster of *Begin Again* positions the film as a rom-com.[19] More specifically, the layout adheres to the conventions of an opposites-attract rom-com poster, as it is dominated by a male-female couple, visually very different from each other, posing against a brightly lit background and separated by an object placed between them. As is also often the case with rom-coms, the film's title and the names of the cast are in complementary colours to make them stand out and further communicate the moral message of the genre (i.e., that opposites attract). The poster, which otherwise fits into what *Empire* mockingly calls the "sitting-down-together" subtype of rom-com posters, only deviates from the norm in that the couple is leaning on a car bonnet rather than sitting on a bench and through the absence of the colour red—a recurrent colour in rom-com posters due to its association with love and passion that was, however, used only in a few versions of the *Begin Again* poster.[20]

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[18] Kerrigan, *Film Marketing*, 90.
[19] Knightley also contributed to positioning it as a rom-com by saying in interviews that this type of film was not normally her cup of tea, but she "read this one and thought it actually ma[de her] feel good […] without making [her] feel like [she was] being drowned in sugar" (quoted in Lang, "Keira Knightley Says").
[20] Alastair Plumb, "The 7 Romantic Comedy Movie Poster Clichés," *Empire*, January 25, 2011, https://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/romantic-comedy-movie-poster-cliches/.

As noted above, the composition is dominated by a male-female couple, or rather by *the* male-female couple around whom consumers can expect the narrative will revolve. This visual prominence also has to do with the fact that, as is also common in the genre, the couple is played by film stars, and the poster aims to ensure that the mass audiences unlikely to respond to Carney are aware of this before the release. In the case that the consumer is unable to identify the stars in the image, they can resort to the line containing the names of the main cast members either at the top or in the billing block at the bottom, depending on the version. The name of the female lead, Keira Knightley, occupies the leftmost position, which both reflects her placing in the image and ensures that it is always read first. It is followed by the name of the co-protagonist, Mark Ruffalo, and then those of some of the supporting actors.

Overall, to maximise the film's potential gross, the poster simultaneously positions *Begin Again* as a John Carney film along the lines of *Once*, thereby appealing to cine-sophisticated niche audiences, and as a star-driven rom-com vehicle for Keira Knightley aimed at mainstream mass audiences. Given the kind of films associated at the time with the respective personas of Carney and Knightley, we find that the designers took a considerable risk by identifying them both as stars. Richard Dyer argues that bringing a star actor into a film also means bringing the film to their persona and running the risk of audience alienation if there is a *problematic fit*, that is, a perceived conflict between such persona and the character the star plays in the film.[21] However, he does not account for the possibility of non-actor stars and, therefore, that "deviating from previous directorial style or association with a particular genre can be dangerous for a filmmaker, similarly to the danger of typecasting which faces the successful actor."[22]

For Knightley, an A-list Hollywood star with no musical experience, who at the time was mainly associated with lead roles in action-adventure blockbusters and period dramas, a protagonist part in a contemporary medium-budget film musical was certainly a bold career move that could have alienated mass audiences. Carney's position was even more precarious. After an almost twenty-year career in independent film in his native Ireland and having risen to world fame as a paragon of

[21] Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 129–31.
[22] Kerrigan, *Film Marketing*, 89.

musical authenticity with *Once*, he was deviating from his established style by making a star-driven Hollywood remake-cum-rom-com of his own film that could result in his "previous audience [being] alienated without the new audience fully accepting" *Begin Again*.[23]

Even though other cast members were also well-known at the time, for one reason or another, their casting in *Begin Again* was not seen as problematic. Ruffalo and Keener had already participated in blockbusters but had solid indie credentials. Levine, Green, and Bey were professional musicians, and Corden and Steinfeld were up-and-coming actors with proven musical skills.[24] Neither a musician nor an indie star, Knightley fit like a square peg in a round hole from the outset. To make things worse, she came in as a last-minute replacement for Scarlett Johansson, who had agreed to play the role of Gretta in June 2011 but had to pull out shortly before principal photography was due to start. A successful actor in blockbusters and indies, and a (much less successful) professional singer since 2008, Johansson was as perfect for the role as Carney could possibly have wished for.[25]

We can only speculate whether any other actor could have ever filled the void. Still, what is certain is that Knightley could not, as Carney would eventually and infamously express in an unprecedented exercise of honesty while promoting *Sing Street* about two years later. Asked by *Den of Greek* first and then by the British *Independent* about why he had returned to Ireland to make a small movie after shooting *Begin Again*, he said that *Sing Street* came from the frustration of working with her, a "(super)model" or "star" rather than a "proper actor," someone who did not believe "in the magic of cinema" and had an entourage who made it "very hard to get any real work done." Furthermore, despite his best efforts, she had been unable to perform her role convincingly because she "wasn't a singer and wasn't a guitar player" and lacked "the level of honesty and self-analysis" required of an actor.[26]

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[23] Kerrigan, *Film Marketing*, 89.
[24] In addition to starring in other film musicals, over the last few years, Steinfeld has dabbled in professional singing, and Corden has often shown off his musical talents on *The Late Show*.
[25] Carney has said that he considered casting a real pop star like Adele to play Gretta, but he quickly discarded the idea because the movie would then have been about her "playing […] a version of herself" ("Carney Considered Casting Adele"). He did, however, cast Adam Levine to play Dave, arguing that "it's fun to watch somebody do kind of a version of themselves or bring elements to that character" and that "if it's going to be an actress singing, […] we'd have to make up with that by having a real singer in another role" ("Interview: *Once* Director John Carney Begins Again," interview by Edward Douglas, *ComingSoon*, July 1, 2014, https://www.comingsoon.net/movies/features/120042-interview-once-director-john-carney-begins-again).
[26] "Carney: 'I'll never'"; "John Carney interview."

Obviously, neither said any of this during the promotion of *Begin Again*, which largely adhered to the clichéd image of on-set congeniality. Aside from a few interviews, in which Carney implied that Knightley was not fond of his *cinéma vérité* approach and that her relationship with the paparazzi and fans had hindered filming, and Knightley said that he liked "chaos" and the script had not detailed how much singing she would have to do, everything was good words between them.[27] Moreover, significant efforts were made by the filmmaker and the actor to convince audiences of the latter's suitability for the role and to transform the potentially problematic fit into a successful instance of career reorientation, expectation defiance, and actor versatility and professionalism. According to the narrative that they jointly constructed during promotion, Knightley had first become interested in the project because she was trying to distance herself from period dramas.[28] Then, although the challenge of playing a singer-songwriter seemed terrifying at first, she had managed to overcome her inexperience and limitations as both a singer and a musician, as well as the boundaries of her star persona, and deliver a passable job of playing a character who, in any case, was never meant to have the voice of a Mariah Carey or a Judy Garland.[29]

Carney's belated outburst of sincerity sparked a wave of online outrage and hatred. A few days later, he apologised privately to the actor and posted a public apology on Twitter, saying that he was ashamed of himself for the "petty, mean, and hurtful" things he had said about Knightley and for blaming her for what were "holes […] in [his] own work."[30] These apologies, however, do not make it any less true that the shooting was very difficult because the pair did not get along with each other, as she eventually admitted in 2019,[31] and that he has remained rather upset over *Begin Again* since he

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[27] See "Carney goes urban"; "IFTN talks to *Begin Again* writer-director John Carney," interview by Dylan Newe, *IFTN*, July 9, 2014, http://www.iftn.ie/production/production_news/?act1=record&aid=73&rid=4287355&sr=1&only=1&hl=john+carney&tpl=archnew; "Keira Knightley interviewed," 2:38–3:30, 8:46–9:51.
[28] See Jonathan Dean, "Now she's a rock chick," *Sunday Times*, June 29, 2014, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/now-shes-a-rock-chick-v3wh8t0pvtm; Lang, "Keira Knightley Says"; Logan Hill, "Singing an Ode to the Naked City," *New York Times*, May 2, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/movies/begin-again-is-set-in-a-real-new-york-of-real-musicians.html.
[29] See, e.g., "IFTN talks"; "Interview: *Once* Director"; PA Media, "*Begin Again*'s a first for its stars," *Irish Independent*, April 27, 2014, https://www.independent.ie/world-news/begin-agains-a-first-for-its-stars-30221535.html.
[30] John Carney, Twitter Post, June 1, 2016, https://twitter.com/jayceefactory/status/738095227135741953.
[31] "Keira Knightley on Harvey Weinstein: 'I wasn't targeted because I had a certain amount of power,'" interview by Tara Brady, *Irish Times*, January 5, 2019, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/keira-knightley-on-harvey-weinstein-i-wasn-t-targeted-because-i-had-a-certain-amount-of-power-1.3733867.

made it. Both this feeling and the outburst itself would ultimately stem from the spuriousness he thinks he allowed himself to fall into in *Begin Again*, of which "Knightley […] pretending to sing" would be the most visible symbol, and the idealisation of *Once* as a paragon of authenticity.[32]

Carney did not let this out during promotion either. Instead, he focused on assuaging the reservations of the *Once* fanbase by insisting that, despite its substantial budget, post-synchronised studio songs, "more ambitious story [, and] larger palette of characters,"[33] *Begin Again* was not a deviation from his style but was as authentic as *Once* because it had been shot on location and often using guerrilla filmmaking techniques.[34] To prove his point, he would often bring up that he had done the location scouting himself while cycling around the city[35] and had shot the Times Square scene at 3 a.m. with a handheld camera, no permits, no streets shut off, and no hired extras.[36] What is more, caught between the devil of excessive similarity and the deep blue sea of excessive difference, he would also often highlight that, whereas both films lack a fairy-tale ending and touch on migration and innocence,[37] *Once* is about musical talent and *Begin Again* is about the music industry—about how musicians and the industry work together and reach compromises "to create something."[38] Eventually, he came up with the idea of the two movies belonging to an on-going musical "portfolio" or "series" to try to account for the many similarities between them, which critics and audiences began to find as soon as *Begin Again* opened, without resorting to the label *remake.*[39]

Despite Carney's best efforts, the strategy, based on what in many cases were at best half-truths,[40] did not work out, if only because its deployment in parallel with promotional activities aimed at positioning the film as a star-driven rom-com and the extreme resemblance of its narrative to *Once*

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[32] See, e.g., "Sundance: John Carney."
[33] "Carney Considered Casting Adele."
[34] "*Once* director returns with *Begin Again*," interview by Connie Ogle, *Seattle Times*, July 1, 2014, https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/movies/lsquooncersquo-director-returns-with-lsquobegin-againrsquo/.
[35] "Interview: *Once* Director."
[36] See, e.g., "*Begin Again*'s John Carney on Manhattan, Musicals and His Bono Project," interview by Katie Van Syckle, *Rolling Stone*, June 24, 2014, https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/begin-agains-john-carney-on-manhattan-musicals-and-his-bono-project-120498/; "Carney Considered Casting Adele"; "*Once* director returns."
[37] See, e.g., "*Begin Again*'s John Carney."
[38] "*Once* director returns."
[39] "Carney goes urban."
[40] For instance, it was a professional crew that found the locations, and permits were obtained, streets closed down, and extras hired for the vast majority of the exterior scenes.

largely undermined his claims to authenticity and originality. Consequently, *Begin Again* was critically regarded as an attempt at reimagining or making a "mainstream version of"[41] *Once* with film stars, a more substantial budget, and a different setting that only sporadically managed to recapture the authenticity of the previous film and with a soundtrack not nearly as good.[42] Although most reviewers were quite understanding and conceded that delivering a film as unique as *Once* a second time was almost impossible, a few were far less benevolent. For instance, Andrew O'Hehir wrote in *Salon* that *Begin Again* looked like a "pale facsimile" of *Once*;[43] Ty Burr of the *Boston Globe* commented that it felt "as though Carney had taken out everything that felt fresh and non-Hollywood from *Once* and replaced it with time-tested cliché,"[44] and the *New York Post* critic Kyle Smith said that "if *Once* was a bracing blast of cool spring water, *Begin Again* is a can of Fanta. If *Once* was a piano, *Begin Again* is a keytar. If *Once* was Otis Redding, *Begin Again* is Bruno Mars."[45]

When judged solely on its own merits, *Begin Again* was generally considered a crowd-pleasing, feel-good, cheesy, musical fairy-tale that, while predictable and not good, turns out to be quite enjoyable provided that one is "in the mood for a light-hearted musical diversion,"[46] ready to "meet [it] at least half-way,"[47] and willing to overlook its many flaws, contradictions, and contrivances.[48] More critically, its unabashed endorsement of the artistic phoniness and clichés it

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[41] Mark Kermode, "*Begin Again* reviewed by Mark Kermode," Kermode and Mayo's Film Review, *BBC Radio 5*, July 11, 2014, video, 0:58–1:02, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p022p04m.
[42] Still, one of the tunes on the soundtrack, "Lost Stars," was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Original Song. Written and produced by Gregg Alexander, Danielle Brisebois, Nick Lashley, and Nick Southwood, it is performed in the film by both Gretta and Dave.
[43] Andrew O'Hehir, "*Begin Again*: A corny attempt to recapture the magic of *Once*," *Salon*, June 25, 2014, https://www.salon.com/2014/06/25/begin_again_a_corny_attempt_to_recapture_the_magic_of_once/.
[44] Ty Burr, "*Begin Again*: When *Once* isn't enough," *Boston Globe*, July 1, 2014, https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/movies/2014/07/01/begin-again-when-once-isn-enough/DHze7oV184o7yRwHECqjIO/story.html.
[45] Kyle Smith, "Musical drama *Begin Again* fails to hit the right notes," *New York Post*, June 25, 2014, https://nypost.com/2014/06/25/musical-drama-begin-again-fails-to-hit-the-right-notes/.
[46] Christopher Orr, "The Modest Pleasures of *Begin Again*," *The Atlantic*, July 4, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/07/begin-again/373947/.
[47] Alonso Duralde, "*Begin Again* Review: Keira Knightley and Mark Ruffalo's Music Biz Fable Has an Irresistible Hook," *The Wrap,* June 26, 2014, https://www.thewrap.com/begin-again-review-keira-knightley-mark-ruffalo-john-carney-once/.
[48] See, e.g., David Rooney, "*Begin Again*: Toronto review," *Hollywood Reporter*, September 8, 2013, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/begin-again-toronto-review-624080/; Duralde, "*Begin Again* Review"; George Byrne, "*Begin Again* (12A)—'romantic charmer that hits the right notes,'" *Irish Independent*, July 11, 2014, https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/movies/movie-reviews/begin-again-12a-romantic-charmer-that-hits-right-notes-30423961.html; Mark Kermode, "*Begin Again* review—ramshackle charm," *Guardian*, July 13, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jul/13/begin-again-review-ramshackle-charm-john-varney; Mick LaSalle, "*Begin Again* review: Music drama hits more than misses," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 1, 2014, https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Begin-Again-review-Music-drama-

allegedly wants to question, along with its overall shallowness, glossiness, disingenuousness, and implausibility, may make watching *Begin Again* almost unbearable.[49] The fact that the Tomatometer ratings for the movie currently stand at a remarkable 83% for critics and 81% for audiences, along with the over $63 (€58.3) million it grossed worldwide, show that those who were in the mood turned out to be a much larger group than those who were not.[50]

Given her star status and the fact that it was her first time singing on screen, Keira Knightley attracted plenty of critical attention. Reviewers did not blame her much for the film's faults and agreed that she pulled off the character and songs well enough, although they also contended that her persona and voice greatly contribute to making "the numerous calculated contrivances of *Begin Again*'s story more obvious and harder to swallow" from the very start of the film.[51] Musicals may be contrived by definition, but for many critics, Carney may have overdone it a little when he asks the viewer to believe that a well-experienced A&R man could ever see the next Norah Jones or an epitome of authenticity in Knightley, her "thin, flat singing[,] and her character's dear-blog lyrics."[52]

While most critics nonetheless decided to stay with Carney until the end and quite enjoyed the ride, very few were oblivious to the fact that *Begin Again* keeps demanding efforts of suspension of disbelief or, rather, giant leaps of faith to be enjoyed. The soundtrack, which has as a central role in

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hits-more-than-5593021.php; Peter Travers, "*Begin Again* review," *Rolling Stone*, June 26, 2014, https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/begin-again-117230/; Steve Pond, "Toronto Review: *Once* Director Finds the Magic Twice With *Can a Song Save Your Life?*," *The Wrap*, September 8, 2013, https://www.thewrap.com/toronto-review-once-director-finds-the-magic-twice-with-can-a-song-save-your-life/; Susan Wloszczyna, "*Begin Again*," *Roger Ebert*, June 27, 2014, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/begin-again-2014; Susie McBeth, "6 reasons why *Begin Again* is the feel-good movie of the summer," *Metro*, July 14, 2014, https://metro.co.uk/2014/07/14/6-reasons-begin-again-is-the-feel-good-movie-of-the-summer-4797322/.

[49] See, e.g., Kenneth Turan, "*Begin Again*'s music more appealing that its story," *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 2014, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-begin-again-review-20140627-column.html; Paul MacInnes, "*Can a Song Save Your Life?* Toronto 2013—first look review," *Guardian*, September 9, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/sep/09/can-a-song-save-your-life-toronto-2013-review; Peter Bradshaw, "*Begin Again* review—Keira Knightley and Mark Ruffalo improbably gallop around," *Guardian*, July 10, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jul/10/begin-again-review-keira-knightley-mark-ruffalo; Peter Howell, "*Begin Again* wants you to just believe: review," *Toronto Star*, July 14, 2014, https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/movies/2014/07/10/begin_again_wants_you_just_to_believe_review.html; Rex Reed, "In *Begin Again*, Keira Knightley Straps on a Guitar and Tries to Sing," *Observer*, June 25, 2014, https://observer.com/2014/06/in-begin-again-keira-knightley-straps-on-a-guitar-and-tries-to-sing/; Smith, "Musical drama"; Wesley Morris, "Small(er) Movie Roundup: *Boyhood*, *Deliver Us From Evil*, *Life Itself*, and More," *Grantland*, July 16, 2014, https://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/smaller-movie-roundup-boyhood-deliver-us-from-evil-life-itself-and-more/.

[50] "*Begin Again*," in *Rotten Tomatoes*, accessed September 29, 2021, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/begin_again_2013.

[51] Turan, "*Begin Again*'s music."

[52] Morris, "Small(er) Movie Roundup."

the narrative as in any other musical and is often regarded as the best thing about the film, is not impervious to this either.[53] Some reviewers pointed out that one is asked to believe that Gretta and Dave's songs are opposites in terms of authenticity when they are not, to the extent that her demo is not the soul-baring acoustic solo album one would expect from such a pure artist but a collection of commonplaces that are as produced and shallow as Dave's.[54] This, in turn, led a number of critics to question the exact point of the outdoor recording montages, even more so given that they slow down the narrative, and what we hear through them is not location sound but post-synchronised, processed versions of the songs being performed.[55]

The most common answer to this question is that, rather than an expression of artistic sincerity and rebelliousness, the outdoor recording is simply a calculated excuse to bring up the conventions of the let's-put-on-a-show Hollywood musical,[56] evoke the outdoor busking of *Once*, and showcase NYC tourist landmarks.[57] Shot in luminous colours by Yaron Orbach, these locations also make Carney's—and Ruffalo's—claims about the film aiming to offer viewers a non-postcard, authentic portrait of the city difficult to sustain,[58] so it is no wonder that the overall feeling for A. O. Scott of the *New York Times* was that the real locations "somehow look as artificial as studio back-lot sets."[59]

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[53] See, e.g., Burr, "*Begin Again*"; Duralde, "*Begin Again* Review"; Erick Kohn, "Review: Does the Keira Knightley-Starring *Begin Again* Celebrate the Music Industry or Critique It?," *IndieWire*, June 26, 2014, https://www.indiewire.com/2014/06/review-does-the-keira-knightley-starring-begin-again-celebrate-the-music-industry-or-critique-it-24866/; McBeth, "6 reasons why"; Peter Debruge, "Toronto Film Review: *Can a Song Save Your Life?*," *Variety*, September 8, 2013, https://variety.com/2013/film/markets-festivals/toronto-film-review-can-a-song-save-your-life-1200603577/; Pond, "Toronto Review"; Smith, "Musical drama"; Travers, "*Begin Again*"; Turan, "*Begin Again*'s music."

[54] See, e.g., A. O. Scott, "The Genre, if Not the Song, Remains the Same," *New York Times*, June 27, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/27/movies/begin-again-from-the-once-director-john-carney.html; Bradshaw, "*Begin Again* review"; Kohn, "Review"; Mark Jenkins, "*Begin Again*, a Music Fantasy Both Sticky and Sweet," *NPR*, June 26, 2014, https://www.npr.org/2014/06/26/325510966/begin-again-a-music-fantasy-both-sticky-and-sweet?t=1633268806764; MacInnes, "*Can a Song*"; Morris, "Small(er) Movie Roundup"; O'Hehir, "*Begin Again*"; Smith, "Musical drama."

[55] See, e.g., Bradshaw, "*Begin Again* review"; David Edelstein, "Keira Knightley and Mark Ruffalo Make Sometimes-Beautiful Music in *Begin Again*," *Vulture*, June 27, 2014, https://www.vulture.com/2014/06/movie-review-begin-again-keira-knightley-mark-ruffalo-once-director.html; Debruge, "Toronto Film Review"; Ignatiy Vishnevetsky, "*Begin Again* is little more than a 'let's put on a show' musical," *AV Club*, June 26, 2014, https://www.avclub.com/begin-again-is-little-more-than-a-let-s-put-on-a-show-1798180776; Kohn, "Review."

[56] See, e.g., Bradshaw, "*Begin Again* review"; Burr, "*Begin Again*"; Duralde, "*Begin Again* Review"; Turan, "*Begin Again*'s music"; Vishnevetsky, "*Begin Again.*"

[57] See, e.g., O'Hehir, "*Begin Again*"; Smith, "Musical drama."

[58] Hill, "Singing an Ode."

[59] Scott, "The Genre."

Drawing objections for their visual and aural artificiality, the montages were also compared unfavourably with Dan's imaginary arrangement of "A Step You Can't Take Back," which was often considered one of the film's best scenes, to the extent that Steve Pond described it as "as wonderful a moment as the ["Falling Slowly"] scene in *Once*."[60] Although we quite like the scene ourselves, we cannot help but find ironic that, for all the yammer about contrivances in *Begin Again*, its least naturalistic, most old-school musical moment should not only have been critically praised but also regarded as one of the closest to the spirit of *Once*, when the latter was acclaimed precisely for its lack of orchestras coming up from the ground. Likewise, we cannot help but notice that Carney's decision to set up the recording of the demo album as a series of montages with post-synchronised sound was not seen as detrimental to the overall authenticity of *Once*, yet it was very much so in the case of *Begin Again.*

When we read reviewers like Mark Kermode observing that the sound in *Begin Again* is "very produced" and in *Once* is "anything but," or Peter Debruge opining that Carney was no longer "operating in *Once* mode" because, if he were, he would have "done those songs guerrilla-style," we realise that the critical assessment of *Begin Again* seems to have involved a certain amount of negligence and prejudice.[61] We say *negligence* because observations like Debruge's confirm that the novelty, modesty, and charm of *Once* dazzled a number of critics back in 2007 and, consequently, many of its contrivances passed unnoticed. Although still a fairly recent film, by 2013, the Dublin-set musical was already being cherished as both a modern indie classic *and* an epitome of documentary authenticity. This left *Begin Again*, once it started to be recognised as a reimagining of *Once*, even more vulnerable to the dominant, *prejudiced* critical understanding of film remaking, especially Hollywood's, "as a one-way process: a movement from authenticity to imitation, from the superior self-identity of the original to the debased resemblance of the copy."[62] In other words, if remakes are generally regarded by default as inherently inauthentic, the critical failure to see through the alleged

[60] See Jenkins, "*Begin Again*"; Kohn, "Review"; O'Hehir, "*Begin Again*"; Pond, "Toronto Review"; Travers, "*Begin Again*"; Turan, "*Begin Again*'s music"; Vishnevetsky, "*Begin Again.*" For a negative opinion, see, e.g., Burr, "*Begin Again*."
[61] Debruge, "Toronto Film Review"; Kermode, "*Begin Again* reviewed."
[62] Verevis, *Remakes*, 58.

*cinéma vérité* authenticity of *Once* made *Begin Again* look by comparison much more artificial and contrived than it really is.

Critical opinion notwithstanding, there is little in the narrative and mise-en-scène of *Begin Again* that was not already in *Once*, albeit generally in rougher form. This points, in turn, towards three mutually non-exclusive possibilities for Carney to have made *Begin Again*. First, he is an auteur with a personal narrative style and universe who conceived and shot *Begin Again* as an expansion of the fictional universe first introduced in *Once*. Second, he approached it as an opportunity to revise *Once* and make at last the kind of musical he would have made in 2006 if he had had the necessary resources. Given the shoestring budget on which *Once* was shot, Carney must have had to leave out subplots, characters, and sequences that he had originally planned to include, shoot scenes in a different, cheaper way than he had originally envisioned, and make do with takes he would have repeated had he been able to afford it. Finally, although he did not want to be typecast as a director of musicals, after the back-to-back failure of *Zonad* and *The Rafters*, he was badly in need of a success, so he fell back on the only formula that had proven popular with film audiences worldwide up to that point. Whatever Carney's ultimate motive(s) for making *Begin Again*, the fact remains that it is a remake of *Once*, as the following section aims to show.

## The Refashioning of *Once* in the Narrative and Mise-en-scène of *Begin Again*

Over the years, many European filmmakers have ended up directing Hollywood remakes of their own films, including Alfred Hitchcock (*The Man Who Knew Too Much* [1934; 1955]), George Sluizer (*Spooloos* [1988], *The Vanishing* [1993]), Ole Bornedal (*Nattevagten* [1994], *Nightwatch* (1997)], and Michael Haneke (*Funny Games* [1997; 2007]).[63] Regardless of who helms them, remakes generally make more money than their originals but are paradoxically less liked by audiences and critics. Some find off-putting the remake's fidelity to the original, others its deviations from it, and still others the streamlining that inevitably comes with the need to return a substantial investment via box office grosses. None are taken aback, though, by its intrinsic lack of originality or its attempts

[63] Felipe M. Guerra, "15 Directors Who Remade Their Own Movie—Not Always in the Best Way," *Medium*, August 3, 2021, https://medium.com/fan-fare/15-directors-who-remade-their-own-movie-not-always-in-the-best-way-e008b1db0722; Verevis, *Remakes*, 60–61.

to make itself somehow distinctive by twisting, reshuffling, complicating, adding to, subtracting from, and expanding on the (sub)plot(s), scenes, motifs, characters, and so on of the film established as *original*, casting new actors in the main roles, and/or setting the story in a different time or place. What is more, quite often, by the time the film reaches cinemas, the label *remake* has been gladly endorsed by its creators and has become crucial to the horizon of expectations surrounding it.

That was not the case for *Begin Again*—at least not entirely. At first glance, the film would fit into what, building on Michael B. Druxman,[64] Harvey Roy Greenberg calls "the unacknowledged, disguised remake," that is, one in which "minor or major alterations (in character, time, and setting) are undertaken but the audience is not informed of the original film version."[65] However, *Begin Again* was "pre-sold" to its primary target audience on the assumption that they had "some prior experience, or at least possess a 'narrative image,'" of *Once*,[66] so it may also be considered an "acknowledged, transformed remake," that is, one in which "there are substantial transformations of character, time, and setting, but the original film is variably acknowledged, ranging from a small screen credit to *foregrounding in promotion*" (emphasis ours).[67] Regardless of the label, the very act of repeatedly conjuring *Once* to promote *Begin Again* informed audiences and critics of the former and created an apt extratextual seedbed for establishing intertextual links between the two rather than with other movies to which the latter also bears resemblance, or allusions to which are included in the narrative, such as *A Star Is Born* and *Jerry Maguire* (Crowe, 1996).[68] However, the pursuit could have led nowhere were it not for the significant number of narrative units, related to both content and style, that *Begin Again* clearly borrows from *Once.*[69] In other words, *Begin Again* would have not been read as a remake of *Once* had its narrative not contained so many intertextual *autocitations*, semantic and syntactic, from Carney's previous film musical.

At story level, what basically sets *Begin Again* apart from *Once* is that characters and lines of action that are just hinted at or painted in broad brushstrokes in the latter are fully fleshed out in the

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[64] Michael B. Druxman, *Make It Again, Sam: A Survey of Movie Remakes* (Cranbury, NJ: A. S. Barnes, 1975).
[65] Harvey Roy Greenberg, "Raiders of the Lost Text: Remaking as Contested Homage in *Always*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 18, no. 4 (1991): 170, quoted in Verevis, *Remakes*, 9.
[66] Verevis, *Remakes*, 3.
[67] Greenberg, "Raiders," 170, quoted in Verevis, *Remakes*, 9.
[68] Verevis, *Remakes*, 22.
[69] Verevis, *Remakes*, 5, 21.

former, especially the ex-partners of the two protagonists. Otherwise, the storyline is remarkably similar. One evening, after what by all accounts has been a disastrous performance on an improvised urban stage, a heartbroken singer-songwriter is approached by an enthusiastic opposite-sex stranger. The stranger, who looks like a penniless hobo and is of a different nationality, encourages the musician to get out of their comfort zone and pursue a career in music. The musician is sceptical at first but eventually accepts to continue the conversation over a drink. During the conversation, the stranger also claims to have solid musical skills. A joint musical number confirms these claims and shows the potential of a collaboration between them. The musician begins to respect the stranger's artistic opinion. They soon discover that they are both rather unhappy: One of them has been cheated on and jilted by their partner and is temporarily living with someone close, while the other has a child and is estranged from their spouse. The musician finally comes round to the idea of making a demo album with the stranger, but neither can afford to hire session musicians or rent a state-of-the-art studio. They overcome this by getting an alternative, cheaper location to make the recording and enlist the help of local musicians to provide the orchestration. A kind of attraction develops between them while making the album, but they never get physical. After celebrating the successful recording with a small wrap party, they separate, and the one who had a spouse reunites with their family. The demo album gives them both an entry ticket to professional music. Nevertheless, only the male character accepts the chance; the female one remains committed to the idea of music as a vehicle for individual expression and pleasure, and although she is rewarded for her help, her future seems much less clear-cut.

The three subsections below examine how this story is fleshed out into a film narrative in *Begin Again*, mostly through the use of musical narrative strategies already used in *Once*. They also consider how, despite the higher production values, the resulting narrative ultimately relies on the mise-en-scène, camerawork, editing, and sound design (i.e., the style) of *Once* to convey meaning.

*The Importance of Live Performance*

By opening *Begin Again* with a live solo number at a club, Carney sets the tone for the film as a powered-up version of *Once*.[70] The scene may be set in a crowded interior, played by a star, and lit, shot, and edited using top-notch equipment; however, we cut from black to a live performance in a real location, the star plays a heartbroken singer-songwriter singing her sorrows with just a guitar, the camera is handheld, the music is diegetic, the soundtrack contains its fair share of background noise, and the other lead is introduced as the only person who likes the number. Moreover, this may not be a street, and there may be no passers-by, crossing vans, or thieving junkies, but this is not the controlled environment of a recording studio or an organised concert for a paying audience, either. This is an amateurish open-mic night at a club; audience attention to what is happening on stage is at best intermittent, as shown by the whirring of the microphone, the hum of conversations and the clinking, clanking, and crashing of glasses and bottles, the unimpressed, distracted faces of the audience, and the unenthusiastic applause that Gretta receives when she rushes off the stage.

The scene may not recreate the POV of a casual onlooker in the street, but *Once*'s concern for authenticity shows through in the scene's simulation of the multi-camera, multi-POV coverage conventionally used in the broadcasting and recording of live music events. Although *Begin Again* is a fictional work presumably filmed on a single camera, it negotiates the paradox of documenting "a live performance that is already staged and fabricated" by creating the impression that it was shot live with three—one on stage and another two among the audience—and edited on a vision mixer in real time.[71] The first camera keeps arcing around Gretta, framing her in CU and occasionally showing the audience in the background. While this camera grants us unparalleled proximity to the artist and her viewpoint, the second and third show the stage as seen by the front and rear audience. Significantly, however, no audience reaction shots have been edited into the number, nor do the latter two cameras offer the POV of any specific viewer—two conventions of the coverage of live events whose

[70] According to Knightley, *Begin Again* originally started with Dan. Carney devised the final version of the opening when they were already shooting in NYC ("Keira Knightley interviewed," 3:30–3:58).
[71] Ohad Landesman, "*The Last Waltz/Shine a Light*: All-Access Pass," *Reverse Shot*, September 26, 2014, http://reverseshot.org/archive/entry/1863/lastwaltz_shine.

conspicuous absence emphasises the crowd's lack of emotional response and makes Gretta's initial scepticism towards Dan's proposal all the more understandable.

Both in *Once* and *Begin Again*, the stranger's increasing enthusiasm for the performance is spatially translated into a gradual movement of approach that culminates with the two characters being placed at a conversational distance and the stranger first being shown on screen. In *Once*, as soon as the Guy finishes singing, the camera pushes slightly out to show the Girl's back, reframing the image into an OTS shot from her perspective, revealing the subjective nature of the sequence shot we have just seen, placing the protagonist couple together on screen for the first time, and ultimately allowing the narrative to transition, smoothly and economically, to the shot-reverse-shot dialogue that comes next, in which we first see the Girl's features from the Guy's perspective.

A rather similar sequence is followed in *Begin Again*, albeit in a much more stylised way. For starters, neither Dan's approach nor the ensuing dialogue is presented until about fifteen minutes of screen time later, when the flashback sequence that follows the number catches up to the narrative present. More importantly, Dan is visually introduced towards the end of the song through a complex lens and camera movement that begins by dollying the stage camera away from Gretta while pulling focus to where he is standing in the front row and is completed by dollying back to her to end up with a shot over her shoulder that shows him in the background (figure 8). Since OTS shots usually convey the existence of a connection between characters, we can say that the final framing questions what so far has been the scene's premise: that no one was really paying attention to Gretta, let alone enjoying the number.

Even though the camera movement guides our gaze towards Dan, and Ruffalo is quite a recognisable star who already prominently featured in the publicity materials, the fact that he is framed from a distance and among other audience members in a darkish background may make it difficult to fully grasp the intended meaning of the shot. All ambiguity seemingly disappears, however, in the reverse OTS shot from his perspective that follows (figure 8). It is not just that this is the first time that the camera identifies with a *specific* viewer; it is also that Dan and Gretta are framed almost in isolation, as if the connection between them had suddenly made everyone else vanish from the club, or Gretta's music had transported them momentarily to an idealised, unreal space inhabited

only by them. Still, we have said that all ambiguity *seemingly* disappears because, while "the visuals of the shot […] suggest an equal emotional playing field," Gretta's tense expression makes it clear that she has not realised that her song has reached at least one person—the one whose back we see in the foreground but whose features we have not seen clearly yet.[72] Cut to a reverse angle—and back to reality—to first clearly see Dan's features in an MS of him staring entranced at the stage while Steve rushes past him whooping and applauding (figure 8). Gretta, however, remains unaware of Dan's enthusiasm (figure 8), and the camera conveys this by eschewing her eyeline: He may be looking at her, but she is not looking back at him, so the shot is framed as an audience reaction shot—the first in the scene—by a third-person narrator.

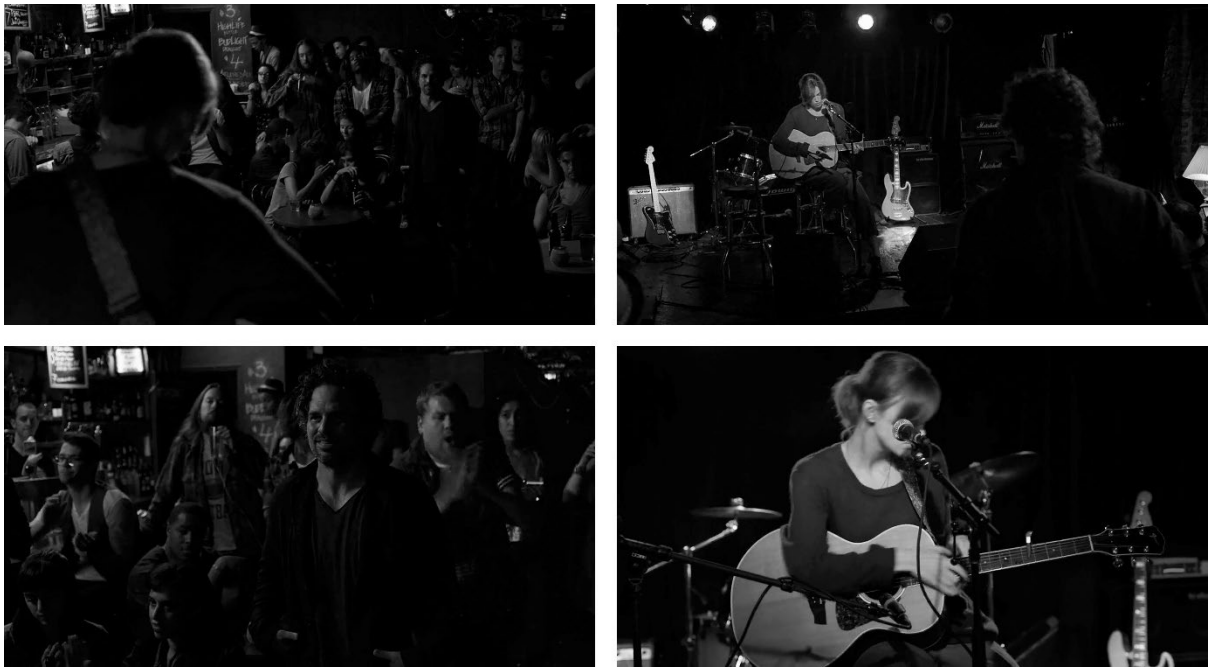

**Figure 8**. *Begin Again*: Dan's first on-screen introduction. © 2013 Exclusive Media, Sycamore Pictures, Apatow Productions, Likely Story, Formatted Films.

Since we are already orientated on where Dan and Gretta are in relation to each other, the closing shots of the scene get us closer to the characters, while also expanding on the one-sidedness of the connection. First, we get closer to Gretta through Dan's eyes in a POV panning MS that follows her as she takes off her guitar and leaves the stage accompanied by Steve. She is as serious as before,

[72] S. C. Lannom, "Over-the-Shoulder Shot: Examples of Camera Movements and Angles," *Studio Binder*, May 17, 2020, https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/over-the-shoulder-shot/.

no longer looking at the audience but towards the side from which she came on stage, eager to return to her seat. Cut back to Dan staring at her spellbound from the angle used before, although more tightly framed so that we can see his features even better and note that he is her opposite in terms of age, gender, built, clothing style, facial expression, and spatial position, before moving on to the lengthy flashback (4:00–21:15) that will address the *dangling cause* just put forward:[73] Who is this character, and why is he the only person who, apart from her friend Steve, seems to have liked Gretta's number?

Although we are offered brief glimpses of the act that follows Gretta on the club stage (22:15–22:30) and of Steve busking in Union Square (34:25–34:40), and her demo album is recorded outdoors throughout the latter half of the film, the narrative does not present another proper live performance until the end, when Gretta goes to see Dave's gig at the Gramercy Theatre (1:36:00–1:41:00). As we discuss below, shortly before this sequence, they argue about "Lost Stars," a ballad she composed as a personal Christmas gift for him that he has not only included in his album, but also allowed the label to heavily alter through arrangement and orchestration. Nonetheless, he invites her to come to his gig and see for herself the reaction it sparks in the audience, and why this is enough to justify his decision to make it public. She does not commit to attending the event and simply begs him not to play the arranged version of the song. He agrees.

When we cut to the Gramercy, we do not see Gretta immediately. For about thirty seconds, we are shown in conventional music documentary fashion that this is a professional gig at a dedicated venue that has nothing to do with the amateur open-mic night that kicked off the narrative. The sequence is introduced by two conventional establishing VWS of the exterior of the theatre showing the marquee with Dave's name on it and a moderate-sized queue of fans waiting to access the venue. We move to a group MS of the fans going through security so that we can see that most of them are young girls, and the lobby has been decorated with giant posters of Dave's album cover. The aural foreground is defined by the murmur of the queue and the sound of traffic passing by, and the background by the bridge of "No One Else Like You," which has no identifiable on-screen source and

[73] Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 20–21.

is interpreted as spill-over sound from the interior. As the version we are hearing is the same as we previously heard Dave recording at the studio, there is no way we can tell whether it is a piece of pre-recorded, pre-show music or the concert has already started and he is performing it live. Regardless of the answer, at this point in the sequence, "No One Else Like You" seems to anticipate that Dave will not live up to his promise, if only because this is the song that he first recorded for the label and that moment marked the beginning of his corruption by the industry, underlined by his growing a moustache—and later a hipster beard—and his taking to matcha tea.[74]

The last bars of the song are used as a sound bridge that connects the exterior and interior of the theatre. As we cut to the latter, "No One Else Like You" becomes synchronous with the visuals—a LS from the perspective of one of the viewers in the fifth or sixth row shows Dave finishing the song in front of a backing band and bowing to rapturous applause immediately afterwards. However, as this interior has not yet been defined by an establishing shot, we do not know the size of either the theatre or the crowd. This is taken care of next: A panning VWS from the gods allows us to see that the theatre has at least two levels, that sound quality is being monitored from a mixing desk, that the house is packed, and, more importantly, that the whole crowd is enjoying the show as much as the front audience.

Even though the mise-en-scène largely constructs Dave's performance as the opposite of Gretta's and, therefore, appears to signal that there is not a shred of authenticity left in him, a few details remind us of a concert by an indie singer-songwriter or an unplugged gig by a pop artist. Dave is holding an acoustic guitar and standing at the centre of an austere stage. Although there are lanterns hanging from the ceiling over the stage, the main source of lighting while he is performing is a soft, warm spotlight focused on him, which creates an atmosphere of intimacy and almost makes us forget about the backing band in the dimly lit background. Furthermore, the impression of a close connection between Dave and the crowd is aided by the use of a long depth of field, which keeps Dave and most of the audience in focus.

Rather implausibly, although rather unsurprisingly given that this is a musical, Gretta arrives at the Gramercy through a side entrance as Dave starts to introduce "Lost Stars." The camera tracks

[74] Growing a beard is precisely what Carney did after becoming famous for *Once.*

her as she advances through the access corridor. Cut to a frontal MS of her standing by the pit door and looking at the off-screen stage. Next, we cut to a slightly low-angle, handheld side MS of Dave that matches her eyeline; we then go back to her, setting the angle that will correspond to her POV throughout the scene. Gretta's is not the only angle from which the number is covered, however. As with her performance, the setup is based on the standard coverage of live music events, although this time it feels as if the act were being covered by four cameras instead of three—three among the crowd (in the front and fifth-sixth rows and in the gods) and another on the stage, which keeps dollying around Dave and frames him from different angles and distances.

Dave introduces "Lost Stars," giving Gretta credit for having written it and asking her to join him on stage if she happens to be there. His words reverberate slightly through the theatre, cueing that it is location sound that we are hearing and, therefore, making the likelihood of Dave performing an *authentic* version of the song plausible. He then starts to sing, and it momentarily seems as though he will not only deliver on his promise but also use one of her compositions to do what she was unable to do at the club: be both artistically sincere and successful with the audience. For about half a minute (1:37:05–1:37:40), it feels as if we have come full circle and the narrative is reaching its climax by remaking the opening number, showing that Dan was wrong all along and that one can succeed in music without orchestration or arrangements, and exploring what a joint record by Dave and Gretta may have sounded like. Everything evokes the beginning of the film: from the camera angles and the use of location sound (or, at least, the impression thereof) to the colour palette and the fact that the song is performed using just vocals and a guitar.

At 1:37:40, however, the song starts to turn into something different, less authentic. As in the reprisal of "A Step You Can't Take Back," which we discuss below, the beginning of this transition is signalled by the emergence on the soundtrack of the beat of a hi-hat as accompaniment to the guitar and vocals. Then, someone in the crowd, who so far has been listening in silence, reacts by letting out a shout of approval. As the song progresses, the reverberation fades out and the rest of the supporting band—a drum, a keyboard, a cello, three violins, an electric guitar, and a bass—is progressively brought out of the shadows to flesh out the orchestration amid cheers from the audience. All in all, then, this segment unfolds as a remake or variation of Dan's imaginary arrangement of Gretta's song,

in which the reaction of the crowd ultimately proves that, as he predicted in their first conversation, the only thing separating her from success was arrangement.

After a minute of absence, Gretta's POV is reintroduced during the chorus (1:38:12) with a pan and crane shot that starts on the enraptured young female fans in the front rows—the "lambs on the run" of the lyrics—and moves up diagonally to pick up Dave. However, when the thirteen-second take is over, we do not cut to Gretta, as could be expected, but to Dave from a different angle. It is not until 1:38:55, just a few seconds before he notices her, that we get to see her again on screen. She seems clearly upset and disappointed. Is she disappointed in Dave for not respecting her vision? In the audience for not reacting to the song in its unplugged version? In herself for having let herself be talked into making as arranged an album as Dave's? In herself for not realising sooner that she and Dave were much too different and there is no chance that they can ever get back together? Or is she just sad because she has realised that the song is no longer hers and Dave's, but the fans'? Although the ending and coda suggest that her sorrow emerges from a combination of all these things, the lines that play over the shot ("But don't you dare let our best / memories bring you sorrow") relate her expression to the realisation that the relationship is over and advise her not to be sad remembering their good times together.

At 1:39:00, we cut back to a side MS of Dave from her POV as he begins to sing the pre-chorus, where he seems to invite her to move on and be ready to embrace what the future may hold for her. He turns his head towards us, notices her standing to the right of the stage, and smiles at her. Cut to her smiling back in an MS from the angle seen before, now meant to be interpreted as his POV, and back to the stage with a reverse high-angle OTS shot of Dave, reminding us where they are with respect to each other. For the next thirty seconds, we alternate between him and her so that the scene unfolds as if there were no one else in the venue and they were holding an intimate conversation through music and gestures. At 1:39:39, Dave stops looking and gesturing at her, and the sense of intimacy between them comes to a sudden end with an OTS shot from her perspective that frames him in LS playing before the ecstatic fans of the front rows (figure 9). Cut to a reverse MS of Gretta in MS and dolly in on her as her face turns even sourer than before (figure 9). The scene cuts next to a shot from behind Dave that allows us to see the audience happily dancing and waving their arms to the

song (figure 9) and then returns to her POV to briefly isolate him in a side MS (figure 9) before moving on to a diagonal pan from the stage to the front row fans (figure 9). Cut to a medium close-up (MCU) of Gretta on the verge of tears (figure 9), back to the fans from her POV, now framed tighter in MCU (figure 9), and back again to her, now crying and nodding before turning to leave (figure 9).

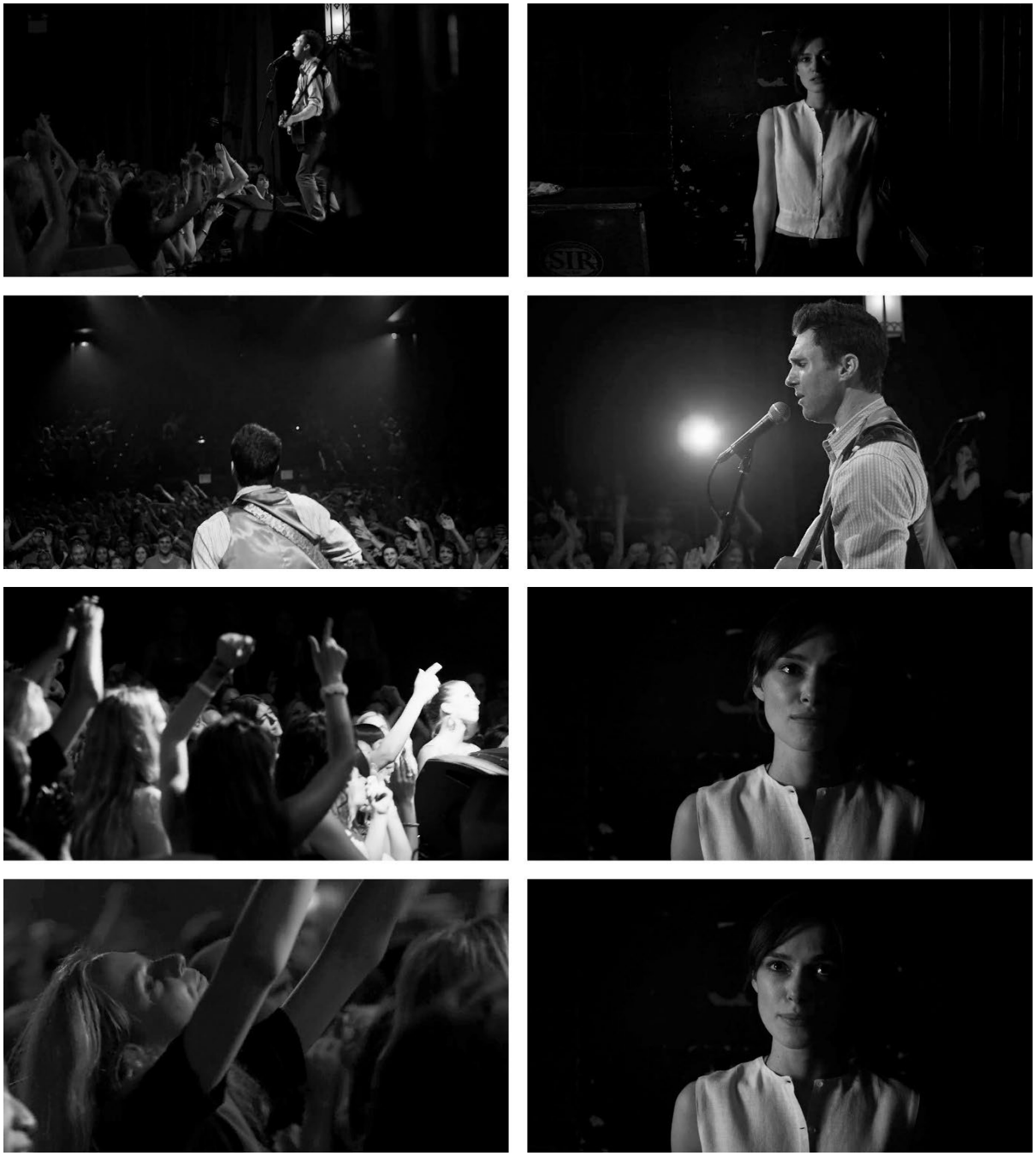

**Figure 9**. *Begin Again*: the connection between Dave and Gretta at the Gramercy is lost. © 2013 Exclusive Media, Sycamore Pictures, Apatow Productions, Likely Story, Formatted Films.

In this final segment of the scene, then, Gretta realises that the connection she thought she and Dave had through music was neither unique nor intimate, that when she thought he was inviting her to "turn the page" and "find a brand-new ending / Where [they're] dancing in [their] tears," he was actually inviting anyone listening to him to do so. While looking at the ecstatic fans, she realises that each of them is feeling as if he were singing to them only and, more importantly, that he has betrayed her by choosing to make public—and profit from commodifying—her privacy. Ultimately, it is not the version of the song on the album or the gig setlist that makes reconciliation impossible; it is his fundamental inability to understand that "Lost Stars" was the equivalent of a love letter or a nude picture and, as such, was never meant to be published. She may be crying as Dave sings "And I thought I heard you call my name / And I thought I heard you out there crying," but she already knows that the song is no longer hers—he has given it to his fans without her permission.

*Music as a Tool for Individual Empowerment*

Carney has said that while Dave is "an amalgam" but mostly his alter-ego,[75] Dan was largely inspired by the young, flashy, all-expenses-paid, cocaine-snorting A&R men who poured into Ireland in the 1990s with hopes of discovering another U2. He could be one of them twenty years later, still mourning the last golden era of the music industry while desperately struggling to stay relevant in the new business environment.[76] A secondary, yet largely unconscious, acknowledged source of inspiration would have been the filmmaker's eldest brother Jim, who passed away in 2013 and to whom the film is dedicated, to whom the original title may even have alluded, and on whom the character of Brendan in *Sing Street* is also explicitly based.[77] Finally, although unacknowledged, we find that Dan may also owe much to the family-oriented, self-reflective, cynical cinematic action heroes of the George H. Bush era, especially Joe Hallenbeck (Bruce Willis), the "broken" hero from

[75] "Carney goes urban."
[76] See, e.g., "*Begin Again* Writer-Director"; "*Begin Again*'s John Carney"; "Interview: *Once* Director."
[77] According to Carney, "Jim felt a personal investment in him because he felt that was him. There was a way that Mark did it that made me think: That's my brother when he was 25. That didn't come from any plan. I showed Jim the rushes and he said: 'You owe me'" ("Carney goes urban").

*The Last Boy Scout*, who in turn is a darker version of John McClane (Willis) from *Die Hard* (McTiernan, 1988) with traits of Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) from *Lethal Weapon* (Donner, 1987).[78]

When the necessary allowances are made for the different settings and genres of *The Last Boy Scout* and *Begin Again*, we are left with a dishevelled forty-something who begins the story waking up to a hangover alone, very late, and in a disorderly place with a bottle of hard alcohol by his side, and for whom all seemingly goes downhill from there. He continues drinking despite his visible hangover and the fact that he has no money. He shows up late at a business meeting. He is verbally abused by—and, in the case of Dan, also humiliated in front of—his teenage daughter, with whom he has almost no relationship and whose looks and attitude he does not approve of. He is separated from his wife, whom he still loves despite the fact she cheated on him and considers him a loser, because underneath he thinks he is indeed a loser who deserves to be punished for not being there for her after something happened at his job that turned him sour on life. He is betrayed by his business associate and friend, although he still wants to work with him. He is beaten up. He periodically expresses his disgust at contemporary music. He listens to his music on a dated format and drives a vintage car—a characterization detail that incidentally also connects Dan to the producer in *Once* and Brendan in *Sing Street*. Furthermore, he tries to conceal his disillusionment behind a facade of detachment, pop-culture references, and dark, self-deprecating humour, although he is on the verge of tears every time he is not in the company of others.

At first sight, it seems that the character is indeed a loser. However, as the narrative progresses, an increasing amount of visual and verbal hints invoke that there is more to him than meets the eye, that he is a man of impressive skills who has done remarkable things in the past. In both films, the apex mountain of the character's past achievements is economically summarised and symbolised with an insert of a CU of a fifteen-year-old picture of the character in a friendly pose with an American celebrity: President Jimmy Carter in *The Last Boy Scout* and, in *Begin Again*, the singer, rapper, and producer CeeLo Green or, rather, as we find out later, a fictionalised version called Troublegum. Nevertheless, given that many audiences outside the United States may be unable to

[78] See, e.g., Susan Jeffords, "The Big Switch: Hollywood Masculinity in the Nineties," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies,* ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava P. Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 196–208; William C. Martell, *The Secrets of Action Screenwriting* (Studio City, CA: First Strike Productions, 2000).

recognise Green, the insert in *Begin Again* is a POV tilt shot from Violet's perspective that contains a more universal signifier of musical success, and explicit information on when and how Dan's career peaked: a framed cover of *Rolling Stone* showing Dan and Saul in happier times and a caption stating that when the issue was published ("1998"), "Distressed Records," their "indie hip-hop" label, was a "gold mine."[79]

Both in *The Last Boy Scout* and *Begin Again*, the male protagonist seems to have fallen from grace because, at some point, he put his principles before his career to do what he thought was right. In the former, we need a flashback scene to know exactly what happened (Hallenbeck saved a girl from being sexually abused by the senator he was assigned to protect and lost his job). In the latter, though, there is no need. The slick headquarters, the trivial matter being discussed—whether to put an audio commentary piece on the company's releases—at the meeting to which Dan arrives late, and the elegant suits Saul and the employees are wearing show that Distressed Records no longer has anything to do with the indie label that made it to the cover of *Rolling Stone* and, by extension, with Dan. As he points out, the neighbourhood has become gentrified since they founded Distressed Records, and so has the label itself. Conversely, he has cast himself as a relic of the past by remaining committed to the company's original mission statement, as his looks and comments betray. Although he has not had a success in five years, he believes that one can still be successful in the music industry of the internet era if one does things differently and devotes time and resources to "nurturing and fostering" new talent. In doing so, he has become a burden for the company and must be let go.

When Saul decides that Dan's cynical attitude at the meeting is the straw that breaks the camel's back and can no longer put off firing him, he does not break out the news by saying "Dan, you're fired" or the like. He resorts instead to a phrase commonly used to end romantic relationships ("We need to talk"), which sparks an argument between them at Saul's office that continues in front of Dan's teenage daughter and the youngish staff. In the course of the argument, Dan reminds Saul that he founded the company and that it was his now-reviled vision that made their current affluence possible. He then unsuccessfully tries to leave with what he considers to be *his* client list and a painting he would have bought. Saul retorts that "things change, times change, people gotta change

[79] Significantly, Carney set up a company called Distressed Films to produce his following film, *Sing Street*.

with them." Since he refuses to do so, the relationship is "not working," and he "gotta go." Overall, the scene (10:07–11:37), which is significantly mostly framed from the perspective of Violet, makes us feel as if we were watching the married couple that we have just seen pictured happy breaking up before their children, with one of the partners trying to grab some things from the family home after being told by the other that they are not loved anymore and asked to move out immediately.

With his dismissal, what little credit the *Rolling Stone* cover may have given Dan with his daughter, who stands horrified in front of the picture throughout the scene, is shattered. He has not hit rock bottom yet, though. Before the flashback catches up to the narrative present, he will still have to endure the humiliation of having to ask Violet for money to pay for the drink he has with her, being hit by an angry bartender in front of her after an unsuccessful attempt at doing a runner, and learn that she hardly knows him after he has been pretty much absent for two years and is seeing a psychiatrist. However, the portrait of Dan's shortcomings is not complete until he leaves Violet at Miriam's.

One of the most notable features of *Begin Again* as a film is that it not only remakes key scenes from *Once*; it also remakes itself as it goes along. Although later in the film, we learn that Miriam is not a model parent and triggered Dan's life crisis by cheating on him, the scene at her house (14:15–15:35) largely feels like a reprise of what we have just seen at the label. For starters, she and her surroundings are constructed as much in opposition to Dan as Saul and the Distressed Records headquarters have just been shown to be. When we first meet Miriam, it is late in the evening, but she is still working on a laptop in the neat, spacious kitchen of a detached suburban family house and looking as neat herself. Furthermore, she would fit into the type of the contemporary woman struggling to have a successful career and a happy family as much as Saul would into that of the contemporary music executive struggling to make ends meet in the era of digital downloads.

For years, Dan has neglected his obligations as father and partner, so Miriam and Saul have had to take care of the child—Violet and Distressed Records, respectively—each had with him that is now becoming an adult. Each is understandably angry when he shows up late and drunk and starts complaining that the label is not moving in the right direction and neither is Violet, without ever acknowledging that each has done what was originally supposed to be a two-person job and managed to keep things going through difficult times, and that he is cut off from the present. Thus, an audio

commentary piece may have been a “shitty idea” for a successful indie hip-hop label headed by two brilliant talent scouts in the booming music industry of the late 1990s. However, in the 2010s, it is at least worth trying because Distressed Records is no longer an indie label, the industry is in recession, and Dan has not signed an artist in five years and keeps sabotaging the company’s business meetings. Likewise, Violet is no longer a little child who can be entertained with an ice-cream and a visit to the Museum of Natural History. In the two years that Dan has been largely absent, she has grown into a troubled, lonely teenager who dresses the way she does so that older boys give her the attention she does not receive from her father. Moreover, pretty much like Conor (Ferdia Walsh-Peelo) at the beginning of *Sing Street*, she plays a string instrument in her room to try to forget about her problems at school and avoid overhearing her parents’ arguments.

Since the beginning of the flashback, we know that Dan is living alone in a bachelor apartment. As his conversation with Miriam progresses, we realise that she gave up on him a long time ago, that something similar to what has just happened at Distressed Records must have happened in this house when she finally did what Saul has just done and that, while for us the scene at Miriam’s is both the culmination of Dan’s downward spiral and a remake of that at Distressed Records, for Violet and her is pretty much a déjà vu. When Dan leaves Miriam’s, he is the epitome of the man who has lost everything, to the extent that even his vintage car will not start.

Furthermore, as given away by his surname, Dan Mulligan is an Irish-American who has lost two of the traditional pillars of male identity (breadwinning and fatherhood) to an African-American man and a white, late incarnation of a lace-curtain Irish-American woman, respectively. However, rather than succumb to or try to rein in the sheer commercialism surrounding him (and which he himself contributed to and for a while was a part of), he has taken shelter in nostalgia, self-destructive behaviour, and self-deprecating humour. That is, he may not be either overtly racist or misogynist, but he is indeed close to the essentialist masculinity of contemporary, blue-collar, often Irish-American male types used by white US neoconservatives to claim gender and ethnic victimhood at the hands of the Federal government, globalization, and especially feminism and the civil rights movement, and

derided by liberals as the last stronghold of troglodytic, white patriarchy.[80] (Re-)born out of the Gen-X ironic, fatalistic take on their own sense of disenfranchisement, as Debbie Ging notes, these "fucked-by-fate" male types actually recur in 1990s and 2000s Anglophone cinemas from both sides of the Atlantic; indeed, a continuous line can be traced from Joe Hallenbeck to Dan Mulligan, one that passes through, among others, the Southies of American gangster movies, the young men of British underclass films, and the socially marginalised fathers of recent Irish family dramas.[81]

At the same time, though, Dan also exhibits traits of other, more positive, older types associated with Irishness in the United States, including the "self-effacing regular guy" of the immensely popular late nineteenth-century musical comedies by Edward Harrigan about another Dan Mulligan. Set in the same district where *Begin Again* is set, the multi-ethnic Lower East Side, and co-starring and co-produced by Harrigan himself and Tony Hart (also alluded to in *Begin Again* through Miriam's surname?), these comedies had already suggested that social climbing, more eagerly sought by Mulligan's wife than him, is equivalent to selling out and causes much unhappiness sooner or later.[82] By becoming a top music executive, Dan did sell out and must have pursued WASP values such as "success, fortune, fame, sex, power."[83] As a result of his past sins, he is now a broken, lonely hero "on the brink of self-destruction" unless he is able to find redemption.[84] The fall and the idea that one can only be redeemed from it and find happiness by returning to one's ethnic neighbourhood, reconciling with one's family and/or community, and striking a balance between Irish(-American) and WASP values are prevalent in classic Hollywood cinema of all genres about the Irish diaspora, including the musical. Needless to say, they also permeate the quintessential Irish-American film: *The Quiet Man* (Ford, 1952).[85]

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[80] See, e.g., Diane Negra, "Irishness, Anger, and Masculinity in Recent Film and Television," in *Screening Irish-America: Representing Irish-America in Film and Television*, ed. Ruth Barton (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 279–96; Diane Negra, "Irishness, Innocence, and American Identity Politics Before and After September 11," in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performative, and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 354–72.
[81] Debbie Ging, *Men and Masculinities in Irish Cinema* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 98.
[82] Dezell, *Irish America*, 20–21; James R. Barrett, *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multi-Ethnic City* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 161–65.
[83] Robert Kee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: Regan Books, 1997), 125.
[84] Kee, *Story*, 126.
[85] See Christopher Shannon, *Bowery to Broadway: The American Irish in Classic Hollywood Cinema* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2010).

Dan's complete isolation is then spatially translated into a lonely, drunken wandering through Manhattan that eventually takes us back to the club where Gretta is singing. If in action movies the first act usually climaxes in a shootout, car chase, and/or fight (i.e., the *whammo*) that gives the protagonist the first opportunity to dust off his rusty skills and changes the dramatic question to whether he will be able to use them to redeem himself, it is only natural that in a musical, such opportunity should come in the form of a musical number—the kind of spectacle that makes the plot move forward in the genre.[86] At 17:50, the flashback finally catches up to the narrative present and Gretta's song *begins again*, at last giving Dan the opportunity to start redeeming himself by using his skills as a talent scout and music producer to see her potential and arrange her unsuccessful raw performance into what could easily become a hit. In other words, he is given the opportunity to *begin again* or, as anyone who is into golf would say informally, to take a *mulligan*.

Like "Falling Slowly" in *Once*, the second iteration of "A Step You Can't Take Back" brings the first act to a climax by showing the power of music as a tool for individual empowerment, what could result from the artistic collaboration between the protagonist couple, and the fact that the stranger who enthused over the performance in the opening scene is indeed very knowledgeable in music. Unlike what occurs in *Once*, though, where the "Falling Slowly" scene is largely told by a third-person narrator in two-shots and constructed as real, what we are offered here is an enhanced version of reality that interweaves the real and the imaginary from the perspective of Dan. Accordingly, if "Falling Slowly" is the musical equivalent of sexual intercourse culminating in mutual orgasm, the reprise of "A Step You Can't Take Back" is a solitary act of masturbation that turns the female immigrant into the passive object of the male citizen gaze and cuts her off from the pleasure of the scene's climax.[87]

Conceived as an homage to the old-school film musical, the scene begins with Dan entering the club, ordering a whisky, and slumping over the bar counter as Steve introduces Gretta off-screen. Right before she starts singing, a side OTS shot of Dan from the opposite angle allows us to briefly

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[86] David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006): 104–105, 112–14.
[87] Laura Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18, https://doi:10.1093/screen/16.3.6.

see the stage in bokeh in the background and to determine where Gretta and Dan are with respect to each other. At this point, Dan is still a defeated, broken man who has turned his back on life, physically and figuratively. Gretta starts to sing off-screen. For the next forty-five seconds, though, the camera stays close to him so that we can focus on how his posture, gesture, and facial expression change, slowly and reluctantly, as the song progresses.

The song, which Gretta dedicates to "who's ever been alone in the city," first catches Dan's attention and prompts him to nod because the opening verse sums up his feelings—something that takes us back not to *Once* but to *November Afternoon*, where Robert's (Michael McElhatton) seem to be voiced by the singer on stage at a jazz club. In this case, what we hear are the suicidal thoughts he would have experienced at the Broad Street subway station, which we do not even know about yet:

> So you find yourself at the subway
> With your world in a bag by your side
> And all at once it seemed like a good way
> You realize it's the end of the line
> For what it's worth

By the beginning of the chorus, Gretta is no longer a singer like the many others Dan has discarded over the last few years. She deserves to be closely looked at, so the screen cuts to a brief MCU shot of her from his perspective (18:36). When we return to him, he is standing up from his stool and starting to rhythmically nod to the beat of a hi-hat that suddenly pops up on the soundtrack as accompaniment in the middle of the chorus. The beat kicks off an audio dissolve that allows the soundtrack to transition from the real to the imaginary during the rest of the chorus, and the first bridge—a ten-second period in which the ambience slowly fades out and is completely removed by the time a keyboard enters the song (18:54). Dan continues producing the tune in his mind throughout the second verse and chorus. He eventually makes it climax in the song's bridge and outro, when the orchestration and arrangement come together into a coherent whole along with several lines of newly

added lyrics that recontextualise the initial suicidal thoughts as a call to open up to her, to start dealing with his problems, and to seize what may well be his last chance at redemption:[88]

> Here comes the rain, so hold your hat
> And don't pray to God, 'cause He won't talk back
> Are you ready for the last act?
> To take a step you can't take back
> Back, back, back
> You can't take back
> Back, back, back

Although the soundtrack does not return to the real until the song's outro, Carney manages to keep the fantasy rooted in reality by not altering most of the song's lyrics and basic chords previously established as real and, more importantly, by swinging the visuals back and forth between the real and the imaginary through shot-reverse-shot cutting. Although the use of a cymbal sound as an audio bridge to smooth out the *visual* leap from reality to fantasy when we cut from him to a CU of the first self-playing instrument from the reverse angle (figure 10) seems to portend a video dissolve, this is not the case. In conventional shot-reverse-shot fashion, the movie returns to Dan and then, surprisingly, stays at the real level of the diegesis, with a naturalistic CU of a bass, a violin, and a keyboard laying idle on the stage (figure 10). Cut back to Dan in MCU mimicking playing a piano (figure 10). As with the hi-hat, the sound of the instrument is added to the soundtrack before the scene cuts to the keyboard magically playing itself, and we are taken back to the imaginary (figure 10). By this point in the scene, we should already know what is real and what is fantasy, so the next two instruments that Dan cues to enter the song—a high tom and a cello—do so without the support of an audio bridge.

[88] See, e.g., Alan Belkin, "Theory of Orchestration," *Alan Belkin Music*, 2015, http://alanbelkinmusic.com/PDF/BelkinOrchestrationTheory.pdf.

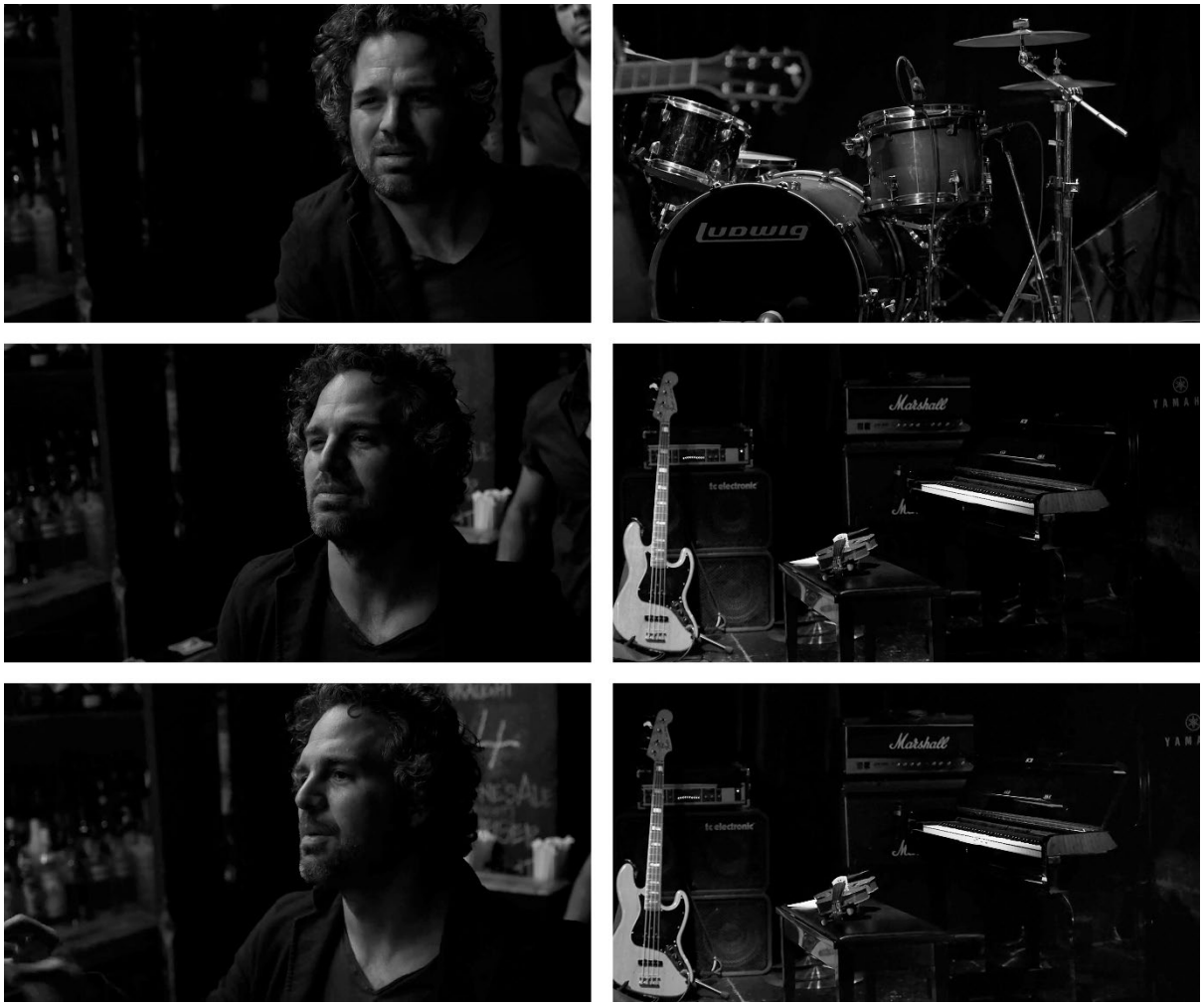


**Figure 10**. *Begin Again*: Dan's imaginary production of "A Step You Can't Take Back." © 2013 Exclusive Media, Sycamore Pictures, Apatow Productions, Likely Story, Formatted Films.

Throughout the first two verses and chorus, Dan remains focused on the orchestration, so for forty seconds, Gretta continues singing off-screen. It is only when the backbone of the orchestration is complete that he shifts his attention back to her. The movie anticipates this, as it coincides with the transition to a new section in the song by abandoning the CU momentarily and cutting to the angle from behind her from which we first saw Dan on screen. This reminds us where the characters are situated with respect to each other and, besides, that the main aims of the scene are to reveal why, when we first met Dan, he felt a connection with Gretta that no one else at the club was feeling and, at a more general level, to illustrate how music can dramatically alter anyone's perception of reality and, therefore, reality itself.

The scene moves on to a MCU of Dan as his growing enthusiasm for the performance finally turns into movement, tracking him as he leaves his position by the bar counter and staggers towards the stage while hearing an increasingly enhanced version of Gretta's vocals, occasionally cutting to frontal MCUs of a faintly smiling Gretta from the reverse angle recycled from the film's opening. We now (re-)interpret the latter shots as Dan's POV, as if he were editing her in the same way he has just edited the orchestration and discarding the many shots from the previous version of the performance where her discomfort showed through. He reaches the front row as the second verse finishes on the soundtrack and, again, a shot from behind Gretta (also recycled from the opening) is used to transition to a new section in the song. Although we are slightly earlier in the song, Dan is shown standing exactly where we first met him, so the impression is that the flashback has almost caught up to the narrative present. This impression is reinforced by cutting next to yet another shot utilised in the opening: a third-person-narrator MCU of Dan among the audience.

By this point, we have spent forty seconds focusing on the instruments and another forty on Gretta. The bridge will bring them together into a musically coherent whole, but before we get to that, the narrative needs to shift focus again and smoothly remind us that although we have not seen them for a while, the self-playing instruments are still there. This is done by inserting three consecutive CUs of the cello and the violin engaging in musical dialogue while Gretta starts to sing the bridge lyrics off-screen. Next, we cut to a profile MCU of Gretta (also taken from the initial performance) and then toggle back and forth between Dan and Gretta until the song's climax, whose arrival is signalled visually through a WS that frames Gretta and the self-playing band together for the first time (20:25, figure 11).[89] The climax is then given an overt masturbatory connotation by cutting to a MCU of Dan making thrusting moves and what could well be called an orgasmic face (figure 11). As he closes his eyes in ecstasy, the screen underscores the unreality and one-sidedness of the moment by cutting to a frontal MCU of a smiling Gretta from Dan's perspective.

[89] The use of "orienting long shots […] to punctuate a scene" and "mark out […] different phases of the action" or to "provide a visual accent" is a common trait of post-classic cinema. See Bordwell, *The Way*, 133–34.

**Figure 11**. *Begin Again*: the visual climax to Dan's imaginary production of "A Step You Can't Take Back." © 2013 Exclusive Media, Sycamore Pictures, Apatow Productions, Likely Story, Formatted Films.

We are then told that this is what Dan was imagining when we first met him by moving to a shot from behind Gretta that includes an abridged version of the lens and camera movement used to highlight his first on-screen appearance. Although the climax carries on for a few more seconds, the shot—which, incidentally, comes about forty seconds after we last saw a similar one—also highlights the descent from the peak of the climax that the soundtrack begins as she moves on to the outro. For a moment, it seems as if nothing had changed. However, while the camera continues alternating between their faces (his satisfied and hers happy), the melody and the lyrics are already different from the rest of the song, and a specific word is repeated up to eight times: "back." Right after the outro finishes, we come full circle and return to the WS of Gretta and the instruments on the stage to allow them to exit, quickly and seamlessly, the unreal space that Dan has created through the scene. The sticks and bows stop playing the strings and drums, respectively, while Dan's mix fades out on the soundtrack and then fades into the beginning of Gretta's original outro over the ambience.

The song has already completed its visual and aural journey to the imaginary and back again, and we now know the reason for Dan's seemingly uncalled-for enthusiasm in the opening scene; besides, the time of the flashback is now practically on a par with the narrative present. We could move on to the next scene here, but Carney gives us a breather to adjust to reality after the number's imaginary climax and holds on the flashback for about twenty more seconds until Gretta finishes singing the outro and prepares to leave the stage (21:12). Although the scene continues unfolding in shot-reverse-shot mode, and the angles from which she is framed match his eyeline, her serious facial

expression, the idle instruments, and especially the soundtrack underscore that the number's coda is set in reality.

Ultimately, then, the reprise of "A Step You Can't Take Back" seems as close, if not closer, to "Falling Slowly" than it does to the scene in *Once* where the Girl adds lyrics to the melody of "If You Want Me" on the Guy's portable CD player while walking around inner-city Dublin at night. It is not just that both scenes are acknowledged as deliberate homages to the old-school musical in which two different reality levels are connected. Almost as if Carney wanted to illustrate Michel Chion's theory of the reciprocal added value relationship between sound and image, in both films, a rough version of one of the singer-songwriter's songs positively alters the diegetic reality of the stranger—or, at least, their and our perception of it—and is bettered in the process without the artist ever knowing it.[90]

*Music as a Connector of Time/Reality Levels*

The capacity of music to alter one's reality and, in particular, to connect different time/reality levels permeates *Begin Again* as much as it does in *Once*. Shortly after Gretta finishes her first performance (3:54), the first chords of the song that will provide musical accompaniment throughout the first scenes of Dan's flashback sequence, "Drowning Pool" by the Irish band The Walls, takes over the soundtrack. On a formal level, the song creates a non-diegetic sound bridge that smooths out the abrupt leap—from present to (recent) past, from Gretta to Dan, from the club to Dan's apartment, and from a seemingly happy Dan to a cynical, disappointed one—that takes place at this point in the narrative. However, as it unfolds over the flashback (sometimes ducking underneath to allow other, diegetic sounds to occupy the aural foreground), it does something else, too. While the visuals build up the character of Dan, "Drowning Pool" acts as a non-diegetic Greek chorus that warns us against trusting the music industry and its A&R men while also preparing us for the revelation that rounds out the characterisation. As Dan opens the padded envelope he has picked up on his way out and starts pulling out demo albums and playing them on his car's CD player, we realise that he is one of those

[90] Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5, 20–22.

"cretins" from the song, an A&R man who cajoles naive artists into signing contracts with the music industry, a "drowning pool" that will "steal your thunder" and "pull you deep down under."

Twenty-three minutes of screen time later, as the first encounter between Dan and Gretta comes to an end at a subway entrance, we know that although she has reluctantly agreed to talk to him, she is committed to an idealistic vision of musical authenticity seemingly at odds with his. She has also made arrangements to fly home the following day because she is "sick of the city and […] want[s] to go back to uni." There are, however, two dangling causes that the sequence raises and leaves unanswered: one about Gretta's recent past (What is the terrible thing that Dan suspects she has gone through while in NYC?), the other about her near future (What will she say to Dan's offer?). Furthermore, by showing their shared love of music and making them unexpectedly agree on Randy Newman, the sequence also suggests that these two seemingly opposite individuals may have more things in common than they think and, therefore, might work—and even be—together.

After they say goodbye, the camera lingers on the subway entrance and lets us see Dan walking away before cutting to Gretta on a subway car, hence shifting the narrative focus back to her. From there, we cut to a cramped, dimly lit yet cosy room where we can see records, music scores, and an iPhone, where Gretta, now wearing a nightshirt and sipping a cup of tea or coffee, is getting ready to sleep on a couch. At first glance, then, everything in the mise-en-scène, including minor details such as the time of day and the drink she is drinking, signals that the narrative is continuing to build up Gretta in opposition to Dan and, therefore, as film musicals often do, that it is again relying on parallelism between the male and female leads to advance the plot.[91] Narrative plausibility demands, however, that at least one *Randy Newman* has to be subtly planted in every scene until the protagonist couple comes together, or the viewer will find the plot and its climax unbelievable. Accordingly, on closer examination, we realise that Gretta is as alone in the apartment—we do not know yet that it is Steve's—as Dan is in his, and that the couch on which she sleeps conveys the same sense of temporariness as the trolley and lack of décor in Dan's.

Whereas in *Once* the Girl's backstory is presented through dialogue, and all the parallelisms, oppositions, and similarities with the Guy are established in the narrative present, *Begin Again*

[91] Altman, *Film Musical,* 107.

develops most of Gretta's characterisation in a flashback. As in the "Lies" scene in *Once*, one of the character's songs is used as a sound bridge that connects their unhappy present to a (seemingly) happier, more innocent, open-spaced, luminous past alongside their ex-partner, with simulated amateur footage visually ushering in the flashback from the screen of a portable electronic device (PED). As in "Lies," too, the lyrics act as a voiceover commentary that warns us against taking at face value whatever happiness we see in the flashback from the vantage point of knowing how the romance turned out. Thus, we are asked not to see her only as "the girl caught up in dreams in fantasies" who has just expressed a naive belief in the pure authenticity of artists like Bob Dylan, or the one shown arriving in NYC with Dave at the start of the flashback. She was innocent and in love then (a hunted "lamb"), but things did not turn out as she expected ("Best laid plans / Sometimes are just a one-night stand"), and Cupid ended up "demanding back his arrow." Now she is "damned," and the images on her iPhone are just a way of "reach[ing] out for" someone she "can't see" (Dave). Still, we are invited to "take [her] hand" and accompany her on her journey into the past and see what happens.

As announced by the lyrics, the flashback, which like Dan's takes up about sixteen minutes of screen time (27:50–44:15) and ends at the club, soon takes a sour turn. When they get to NYC, the contract with the label and the ascent to stardom start changing Dave for the worse.[92] As in Dan's flashback, we witness a business meeting at a record company. Everything is shown to be virtually indistinguishable from what we saw—and heard—at Distressed Records before and, albeit for different reasons, as incompatible with Gretta's vision of music as Distressed Records' was with Dan's. She soon finds herself as side-lined as Dan and begins to drift apart from Dave, moving around the city on a bike (as opposed to Dan, who does the same in a Jaguar) and spending time with her busker friend Steve, whose vision of music is closer to hers and who is far more supportive towards her than his narrative counterpart in Dan's flashback, Violet. Like Dan, Gretta is eventually cheated on, professionally and personally, by her partner and moves out. Before this happens, though, as in Dan's flashback, another brief, embedded flashback takes us further back to a time when Dave and

[92] According to Levine, Carney cast him for the role because he went through a similar phase in the past (Hill, "Singing an Ode").

Gretta were as artistically and personally close as Dan and Saul were at the time of the *Rolling Stone* cover: the moment in which she wrote "Lost Stars" as a Christmas gift for him and they played it together for the first time at a modest student apartment. As before, this brief episode is ushered in through simulated amateur footage displayed on a PED screen (a laptop's) and a sound bridge, although this time, it is the dialogue that negotiates the transition from a recent to a distant past.

By the end of the first act, Dave is as corrupted by the commodified music industry as Saul and, to a certain extent, Miriam are. Gretta is distrustful of Dan and the industry because she has just seen what people like Dan have turned Dave and his music into. However, although she puts artistic integrity before stardom, she is flattered and intrigued by Dan's offer. At this point, she knows—and we know even better than her—that his opinion about her song is worth considering but also that his cynical attitude sets him apart from the executives in either Distressed Records or the label that signed Dave. Coupled with the similarities and parallelisms we have seen through the flashback, and to which we have yet to add that Dan is sleeping on a couch when she phones him the following morning, this makes it believable that she agrees to drop by Distressed Records with Dan and, after Saul rejects her, to the (seemingly crazy) idea of recording a demo album on the streets of NYC. It should also be noted that Saul's rejection comes after another brief diegetic rendition of "A Step You Can't Take Back" by Gretta at his office (46:30–46:45), and that this is not the last time we will hear the song in the film.

In yet another parallelism, the personal and professional relationships between Dan and Gretta both kick off and reach narrative closure to the beats of "A Step You Can't Take Back." Thus, right after the party that celebrates the successful making of the album, whatever hopes Gretta may have had of having a romantic relationship with Dan are definitively crushed when she sadly sees him get into his car with Miriam and Violet. As this takes place on screen, a non-diegetic, instrumental version of "A Step You Can't Take Back" fades in (1:24:00) to underscore the closure of this line of action (and of the second act), reminding us that while Dan's lost equilibrium is largely restored already, hers is not. As shown in a previous musical number ("Like a Fool"), despite the circumstances of the breakup, she is not yet over Dave and, as a result, the imbalance that led to her being at the club where she first met Dan is not yet fixed. While "A Step You Can't Take Back" keeps

playing over the visuals, the third act and its narrative focus are introduced by returning to a dangling cause planted a few minutes earlier: Gretta texts Dave back and tells him that she is OK with meeting him in NYC. Unsurprisingly, the abruptness of the cut from Gretta to the VWS that serves as an establishing shot for the encounter is somewhat softened by the use of "A Step You Can't Take Back" as a sound bridge—it does not fade out until 1:24:45, when we are about five seconds into their reunion at Schiller's.

"A Step You Can't Take Back" is not the only one of Gretta's songs that is recycled through the narrative. At 48:40, an instrumental version of "Tell Me If You Wanna Go Home" fades into the music track as Dan first comes up with the idea of recording outdoors, and it keeps playing throughout the subsequent montage, which condenses much of the album's pre-production into three minutes by cross-cutting between brief scenes of the final group rehearsing at Steve's apartment (a kind of scene that we also find in *Once*), the setup of a "mobile recording studio" in Dan's car, and the recruitment of three of the musicians. The shots, obviously set in different places and on different time levels, and not even edited in chronological order, are given a sense of unity by the song, although it alternates throughout the montage between the music and diegetic tracks, between occupying the soundtrack and sharing it with other sounds, and between being in and out of synchrony with the images. Later in the narrative (1:15:20–1:16:50), the same version of "Tell Me If You Wanna Go Home" is used similarly to give unity to another montage of vignettes summarising a stage in the making of the record. On this occasion, much of the outdoor recording is condensed into a series of short scenes of the band playing in succession at different scenic NYC locations (the Washington Arch, the Central Park Lake, the Broad Street subway station, and the Bethesda Terrace) over—we assume—the course of a few days. Although more synchrony between image and sound is present throughout this montage, again the song moves in and out of the music track and oscillates between taking over the soundtrack and ducking down to make room for ambience in the audio space.

Indeed, this is not the last time that either "Tell Me If You Wanna Go Home" or montage is used in the narrative. At 1:17:58 (that is, only about a minute after the end of the second montage), "Tell Me If You Wanna Go Home" *begins again* as a vocal, diegetic tune synchronised with the climactic scene in which they finish the album by recording on a rooftop *à la* The Beatles. Although

the lyrics allow Gretta to talk openly about her feelings for Dan and to ask whether he will be finally going back to Miriam, it should not be forgotten that the scene is preceded by a phone call from Dave, and some of the lines seem to refer to the feelings she still has for him, as "Like a Fool" made clear a few minutes before. By way of illustration, the two verses of the chorus seem to refer first to Dave and then to Dan:

> Maybe if you wanna go home
> Tell me if I'm back on my own
> Giving back a heart that's on loan
> Just tell me if you wanna go home
>
> If you're taking me home
> Tell me if I'm back on my own
> Giving back a heart that's on loan
> Just tell me if you wanna go home

We can even add that the song proleptically prefigures the ending, as Gretta will end the narrative "back on [her] own," Dan will go back "home," and Dave will not go back to Gretta's.

Subsequently, in yet another remake of one of the scenes from the beginning of the film, when Dan picks up Violet at school and shows her the finished CD (1:30:50), the same version of "Tell Me If You Wanna Go Home" is used again as diegetic music, giving away the post-synchronised, produced nature of the sound during the rooftop sequence. As he drives her to Miriam's, the song keeps playing in the background (we assume that one of them put the CD in the car's player), although unlike what happens in a similar *Once* scene, it never gets to fully occupy the soundtrack. Finally, as the end credits begin to roll on one side of the screen (1:41:50), the instrumental version of the song fades in one last time to serve as musical accompaniment to two more sequences made up of scenes set at different times and places. First, an anti-climactic split-screen coda that reeks of Weinstein imposition and makes it explicit what the closing scenes before the credits have merely suggested: that Gretta will turn down the deal with Distressed Records because she cannot—she does not want to—be like Dave, and Dan will return to his family and his job at the label. Second, a montage of snapshots from Gretta's album's website—actually freeze frames of shots from the film—recapping the production of the album is signified as a second

flashback into Dan's recent past by the fact that, as with Gretta before, we cut to it as he starts to navigate it on the screen of a laptop. Besides underscoring Dan's arc from depression to happiness, the montage further reinforces the symmetrical structure of the narrative, as we both meet and leave him before entering a flashback of his past.

"Coming Up Roses," the other song that we see the band record in full in the streets of NYC, is used similarly during the second half of *Begin Again*. Thus, when we first hear it (54:48–57:10), its synchrony with the action, the occasional blare of sirens in the aural background, and the brief crossfade at the end with Dan's approval contrive to make us believe that it is location sound that we are hearing and not what it actually is: post-synchronised, studio-mixed sound trying to pass off as location sound. At 57:10, the band finishes playing the song, but it *begins again* on the non-diegetic music track and continues through the following scene, in which Dan and Gretta scout a suitable location to record "Tell Me If You Wanna Go Home." Later in the narrative, at the album wrap party (1:21:30–1:22:20), part of the album version of "Coming Up Roses" can be heard as background diegetic sound coming from the speakers at Steve's apartment. As before, the lack of any perceivable differences between the draft and final versions betrays the fact that it was actually post-synchronised, studio-mixed sound that we heard in the alley. Finally, another fifty-second fragment (1:25:30–1:26:20) is used as diegetic sound in the scene where Gretta and Dave do what the Guy and the Girl do when "If You Want Me" is first introduced in *Once*: sit on a stoop and listen to the song on an in-ear headphone while chatting with one another. Although it is likely that the metallic, hollow version we hear throughout the scene was created through equalization and added in post-production, this successfully creates the impression that we are able to hear it because Dave is not wearing one of the headphones, and the sound is coming from there.

The second half of *Begin Again* contains yet another montage with scenes set in different places and unified by music that alternates between the music and diegetic tracks, between occupying the soundtrack and ducking down beneath it, and between being in and out of synchrony with the images: The night-time rambling of Gretta and Dan around Manhattan and listening to songs from her iPhone on his headphone splitter (1:06:00–1:10:24), a sequence that formally refers to the Girl's after-dark stroll in *Once* but is ultimately closer to the excursion to Killiney Hill. Thus, both the excursion

and the rambling allow the leads to take a break from the album, spend time together alone, and open up to each other while taking a walk through a scenic area. In both, the growing complicity and intimacy between them is visually conveyed by the actors' facial expressions and gestures, and the sustained use of two-shots—either tracking or stationary, depending on whether they are framed walking or not—and OTS shots. Furthermore, both culminate in an oblique declaration of love that will never get physical.

When it comes to differences, we find that the headphone splitter coats the *Begin Again* sequence with an *explicit* romantic aura that is largely absent from its *Once* counterpart. The splitter, a motif that we have seen repeatedly in Dan's car—sometimes in CU—since the film's opening, is given meaning right before the start of the sequence: It is the splitter that he and Miriam shared on their first date together, where they walked around Manhattan while listening to music from her portable CD player. The fact that what we see Dan and Gretta do next is walk around Manhattan while sharing music on that very splitter inevitably turns the segment into a remake of that first extra-diegetic date and, consequently, a date itself. Furthermore, while the Killiney Hill sequence is one of the few in *Once* where dialogue conveys the characters' feelings, the one in *Begin Again* is staged as a naturalistic, yet at the same time old-school, musical sequence where Dan's and Gretta's feelings are expressed through the song fragments that each picks from her iPhone music library.[93]

To ensure that we do not miss the intended meaning, shortly before moving on to the sequence, Dan says that "you can tell a lot about a person by what's on their playlist." As we cut to Times Square, his first pick takes over the soundtrack. It turns out to be an allusion to a classic musical set in the same district and starring as unlikely a couple as them: Sinatra's cover of "Luck Be a Lady" from *Guys and Dolls*, where the protagonist gambler (Marlon Brando) personifies luck as a fickle woman whom he begs to behave like a lady and not desert him, as she has often done to other men, when he places the momentous bet on which his relationship with the female lead (Jean Simmons) depends. By placing it in a new context, and by allowing us to hear only forty-eight

[93] Carney has said that the scene works because it was inspired by a real-life New Year's Eve with his girlfriend in Dublin: "About 11:30, I grabbed two pairs of headphones and a splitter, and my girlfriend and I had this beautiful, uplifting walk through town, going from Frank Sinatra to some obscure '80s band to Joy Division and Stevie Wonder, smiling like an idiot" (quoted in Hill, "Singing an Ode").

seconds from the first bridge and chorus, the song takes on a slightly different meaning than the original: Dan realises that Gretta "might forget [her] manners" and leave at any moment, so in lieu of anything better, he conjures up luck in Beetlejuice fashion—he says its name three times—and tries to convince it to prevent this from happening by appealing to its ladylike traits.

The ultimate reason Dan does not want Gretta to leave is made explicit in the following fragment: Stevie Wonder's version of "For Once in My Life," a celebration of the feelings of happiness, connection, and empowerment that come with being in love and being loved back. Unlike Sinatra's cover, we are allowed to hear the first minute of the tune in full over the dialogue. At that point, they enter a club with their headphones on to keep dancing to "For Once in My Life." The song fades out completely for a few seconds so that we can hear the techno track blaring on the sound system and realise that even here, in the loudest, most mundane of places, music has the power to transport you to another, better place. Significantly, when the song fades back in and occupies the soundtrack, almost all the first chorus has been skipped ("For once in my life, I won't let sorrow hurt me / Not like it's hurt me before / For once, I have something I know won't desert me"), most likely because neither the mention of past sorrows nor the certainties in this part are congruent with what the sequence has so far established as Dan's mood. "For Once in My Life" continues over a series of vignettes that show them happily listening to music, dancing, chatting, singing, and exchanging complicit glances in the streets of the East Village and, like the Guy and the Girl in *Once*, on public transport. As before, though, the song is not allowed to play in its entirety. Right after the instrumental interlude, it crossfades with Gretta's introductory apology for the cheesiness of her musical choice, Sam Dooley's "As Time Goes By," over an Allenesque, large depth-of-field shot of the duo on a bench in Union Square Park.[94]

At this point, we enter a new phase in the sequence. Everything slows down in synchrony with the tempo of "As Time Goes By," which plays for two minutes (1:08:25–1:10:24) and binds the closing scenes together. The passing of time, which the montage has sped up, returns to normal. The brief, almost dialogue-less, multiple-location vignettes are replaced with fully fledged scenes with dialogue set in and around Union Square. Walking, dancing, and singing are largely abandoned for

[94] The width of the mall suggests that the scene may actually have been filmed in Central Park.

sitting and conversing. Shots become longer and rather static, with camera movement almost limited to slow pans that create the impression of passers-by moving to the music.[95] The prevailing mood, which so far has been dynamic and ecstatic, becomes contemplative and reflective, so when Dan metafictionally points out that what he "love[s] about music" is that it can turn "banalities [into] beautiful, effervescent pearls" and describes the night with Gretta as "a pearl," while the song enters its instrumental interlude, it feels like the kind of quiet climax for which the sequence calls. However, unlike the climax of the reprise of "A Step You Can't Take Back," Gretta's reaction shots—and how she gestures him to hold her hand as they stand up to leave Union Square—show that, this time, the feeling is shared.

The question now is where the relationship is going. By cutting from the square to the couple climbing up the stairs to Steve's apartment hand-in-hand, and editing the song so that the last lines we hear as they enter the apartment are "The world will always welcome lovers / As time goes by," Carney creates the expectation that the relationship is about to move to the next level and, therefore, that the narrative will proceed along the lines of a rom-com. However, the narrative has been dropping visual and aural clues that undermine the expectation for about two minutes. First, although the lyrics of "As Time Goes By" seem to replicate the romantic feelings of Dan's musical choices, its association with *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942), reinforced by a WS of them walking in the park that resembles the famous final shot of the classic film, casts a dark shadow over the future of the romance for anyone familiar with the movie, its story of impossible love, and especially its less than happy ending. Second, although by this point the narrative has established grounds for understanding between Dan and Gretta, their musical selections still remind us of their opposing characters. Whereas he chooses to share two arranged covers of songs that are more popular than the originals, she goes for what she naively thinks is the original, the *authentic*, recording of "As Time Goes By," without ever realising that the song was originally composed for a musical in 1931 and also first recorded in the same year. Finally, while we may continue hearing "As Time Goes By" on the soundtrack as they go up the stairs and enter the apartment, music has stopped acting as a bond between them: They are

[95] Among the people featured in the scene is a group of Hare Krishnas. Even though they are a rather common occurrence in Western cities, the fact that they also appear briefly in *Once* cannot be coincidental.

no longer sharing the splitter, and the song has moved to the music track, on which it keeps playing until Steve pops up from behind the kitchenette counter.

At this point, we may also realise that a very similar mise-en-scène is used to build up and then dispel the expectation of sexual intercourse between the Guy and the Girl in *Once*. At 26:31, they arrive at Mountjoy Square, and she invites him in. He accepts the invitation on the hope that she has changed his mind about having sex with him, and they enter the building. We move next to them going up the stairs. Cut to the interior of her apartment, where we see right before a befuddled Guy does the Girl's mother asleep on a couch and her daughter toddling about the floor, signalling that her only intention when she asked him to come in was to introduce him to her family and that, as with Dan and Gretta, the only climax they will ever share is musical.

Next, Steve's mention of Gretta's ex-boyfriend and the YouTube clip that shows Dave receiving a music award (on yet another PED screen) prepare us for the following number: Gretta and Steve's drunken rendition of "Like a Fool" on Dave's voicemail (1:12:40–1:15:05).[96] Besides summing up Gretta's conflicting feelings towards Dave, the scene—which builds on the one in *Once* where the Guy calls his ex-girlfriend while singing about their broken relationship in his bedroom—again shows the capacity of music to connect different places and time levels. Although Dave listens to the song on his smartphone at a later time, by crosscutting between Gretta and Steve at the latter's apartment and Dave on his tour bus while "Like a Fool" plays on the soundtrack, it looks as if he were listening in real time, the music allowing them to communicate across time and space.

Moved by the song, Dave calls Gretta and asks to meet her in NYC, to which she agrees after seeing Dan leave the album wrap party with Miriam. Given that the narrative relies so much on parallelism, it is no wonder that the encounter (1:24:42–1:30:50) is constructed as an opposite of sorts to Gretta and Dan's night-time stroll. They start the sequence by opening up to each other at the now-defunct Schiller's Liquor Bar and then continue talking and listening to each other's albums on earphones while walking around the Lower East Side and sitting on a stoop and a park bench. The

[96] Carney has said that this is one of the scenes that he sensed audiences would enjoy as he was shooting it. He considers it "the purest moment in the film because it was in the bedroom," and "the idea that Proust wrote all of his books lying in his bedroom it just seemed […] a really interesting place to start a big musical film" ("Carney: 'I'll never'").

camera frames them mostly in (tracking) two-shots and, when they sit on the bench, in OTS MCUs stitched together through shot-reverse-shot editing. Although this is not properly a montage, we can feel that time has been condensed; for instance, while we get to just hear a few seconds of each of the albums, it is implied that the characters would have listened to them entirely.

However, leaving aside the fact that it is daytime, we can notice that the takes featuring Dave and Gretta are now generally longer and more static than in the sequence with Dan. That there are more single shots. That there is nothing of the dynamic, ecstatic joy conveyed by the previous sequence, as they spend most of the time sitting and talking with serious faces. She deliberately ignores his attempts to hold her hand and caress her nape. The soundtrack is dominated by dialogue and ambience sound rather than music. More importantly, the sense of togetherness brought about by sharing a track on a headphone splitter is also absent here: As they have only one pair of earphones that they do not even share, the experience of listening to each other's music is necessarily individual. Finally, while Dave's heavily produced version of "Lost Stars" takes over the soundtrack as Gretta starts listening to it, the same does not occur with "Coming Up Roses," which we only experience as diegetic sound leakage from the earphones he has on, presumably signalling that he does not really care as much for her music as he tries to make her believe in his attempts to win her back.

While Dan and Gretta's sequence progressively moves towards greater closeness, this one progresses in the opposite direction, climaxing in an argument that shows how apart Gretta and Dave have grown, personally and musically. Gretta rebukes him for allowing his producers to turn the "delicate" ballad she originally wrote into "a piece of stadium pop" and for using something that was supposed to be intimate to advance his career. He retorts that music is "about sharing it with people" and that she should be happy with the royalties she will be making from the much-beloved arranged version of "Lost Stars." Although there seems to be little room for agreement, as Gretta stands up to leave, we are once more left with a dangling cause: Dave begs her to come and see him play the song at the Gramercy and witness "how everyone's just falling in love with what [she] created," and she replies by begging him not to play "Lost Stars" like he does on the album.

As discussed above, Gretta ends up going to the gig and realising that, no matter how tempting the offers from Distressed Records and Dave may be, her vision of music is at odds with

theirs and can only be preserved if she turns them both down. The realisation that this makes reconciliation impossible may initially be sad for her, but it also makes her ready to move on at last. What matters to us at this point is that when Gretta leaves the theatre, "Lost Stars" alternates for a moment between the diegetic and music tracks before definitively moving to the latter and serving as musical accompaniment to the four intercutting actions that tie up the narrative before the end credits coda: 1) Gretta cycling along the East River after leaving the Gramercy; 2) Dave thanking the audience at the theatre right after performing "Lost Stars"; 3) Dan getting the splitter that Gretta sent back to his office at the label, probably the day before the concert; and 4) Dan and Miriam sharing music on the splitter and kissing while sitting in Union Square.

As the song progresses, the visuals move across time and space to drive the narrative towards a happy(ish) ending in which Gretta's music allows the male leads to finally achieve their goals. While she is cycling, we see Dave receiving an enthusiastic ovation at the Gramercy, and Dan back at his job, first, and then reunited with his wife. However, every time we return to her during the montage, she is more tightly framed, and her expression is less serious. As a result, the closing shot is an extreme close-up (ECU) of her smiling widely, and the viewer is left with the impression that the cutaways to Dan may not be real but, rather, reality as imagined by Gretta. Furthermore, in yet another parallelism with Dan, who started his rebirth by imagining the arrangements for "A Step You Can't Take Back," it is when she starts imagining him that her face changes from sad to happy. In a way, then, the montage would suggest that although Gretta has been able to finally move on from Dave, record an album that may turn her into a star, and pen a song whose royalties may make her rich, her happy ending is ultimately based on having helped Dan to get his life back on track. That is, like the Girl in *Once* or many female protagonists of classic folk musicals, she would ultimately be a "lost star" who is happy simply because she has been able to "light up the dark" in the lives of the male leads.

This could have been a valid ending and, what is more, one that would have been fully in line with those of *Once* and *Sing Street*. Someone over Carney's head seems to have disagreed, however, and as the end credits begin to roll, a tepid, split-screen coda reunites Dan and Gretta one more time, unexpectedly, implausibly, and unnecessarily, to replace the ending we have just seen with a closed,

more conventional one. In the case of Dan, it seems as if this someone had considered that viewers would not be able to infer that he would be moving back in with Miriam unless explicitly told so and imposed an utterly redundant scene where he could verbalise this fact, and hence give a belated, unnecessary, explicit answer to one of the questions in "Tell Me If You Wanna Go Home," and be shown packing everything up at his bachelor pad. In the case of Gretta, that same someone may have felt that there was little material reward for her in the original ending—the Girl at least receives a piano at the end of *Once*—and, besides, that she had to be somehow redeemed for allowing herself to make a produced album so as to show that she remains the opposite of Dave and will never be seduced by the Dark Side as he was. The coda tries to convey this by making her show up at Dan's bachelor pad to tell him that she will be turning down the offer from the label and to ask his permission to sell her album online for $1 per download—that is, exactly the amount of money she would be getting from every album sold if she accepted the offer from Distressed Records. Although the narrative salutes this *Yesterday* (Boyle, 2019)-like resolution as an empowering act of rebellion against the corrupt music industry and even rewards her boldness with $10,000 in download sales, the question is whether this is congruent with the character's claims to artistic purity and her staunch reluctance to share her songs with the public throughout the film. Our answer is no. While what we believe was the original ending left open the possibility that Gretta could eventually remix or even shelve the album, the coda overrides this and presents a Gretta who may shy away from the industry but who is certainly as comfortable with releasing an album full of produced songs and making money from it as Dave could be.

*Music as Community-builder*

Even though there is no language barrier in *Begin Again* between the female British immigrant and the male native citizen(s), for all the relentless positivity of the story, at the end of the narrative Gretta remains as cut off from America as the Girl is from Ireland at the end of *Once*. Gretta may not have a British husband waiting for her back home, but as the end credits begin to roll, we feel that, if *Begin Again* were a western, she would be the lone rider who comes into town to selflessly

restore the lost equilibrium in the community and who has to ride out into the sunset once their mission is accomplished because they are not part of that community.

As said above, by the end of the film, Gretta's music has made it possible for Dan and Dave to achieve what they most wanted—to recover his job and his family, and to advance his career, respectively. However, Carney's obsession with making folk/show musicals with seemingly non-conventional endings ultimately denies the character the chance of achieving either of the only two things in which she shows genuine interest throughout the film: getting back together with the Dave she used to know, and starting a relationship with Dan. As in *Once*, the failure to establish a romantic relationship with a native man by the end of the narrative prevents the female immigrant from assimilating into the host community, even though such a community is far more diverse and no language barrier exists between her and the native citizens. In other words, then, the assimilationist project of the musical genre is as imperfectly realised in *Begin Again* as it is *Once*: The work of art resulting from the collaboration between the native and the immigrant may certainly be better than anything each could make on their own and blur the differences between them; however, it is ultimately a golden ticket (back) into the mainstream for the native alone.

From an ethnical perspective, we could even contend that *Begin Again*, which is set in one of the most ethnically diverse districts of NYC, reaffirms as much as it subverts the assimilationist project of the Mulligan cycle, the classic musical, and by extension much of Golden Era Hollywood. On the one hand, it takes up the type of the Irish-Americans as natural leaders of theoretically inassimilable, non-WASP minorities—especially Jews—in the United States and mediators between them and the WASP majority, making Dan the heart and soul of an ethnically diverse band formed to support a WASP singer-songwriter.[97] On the other, perhaps naively, it presents a diverse, pluralistic, Canadian-mosaic-like America where minorities no longer need to assimilate into the mainstream because they are the new mainstream—one in which the Irish, despite their association with racism and the establishment over the second half of the twentieth century, can still negotiate a place through music, but where their former WASP colonisers, now feminised and turned immigrants, are unable to

[97] See, e.g., Barrett, *The Irish Way*; Shannon, *Bowery*; Timothy J. Meagher, "Abie's Irish Enemy: Irish and Jews, Social and Political Realities and Media Representations," in *Screening Irish-America: Representing Irish-America in Film and Television,* ed. Ruth Barton (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 45–58.

do the same. In fact, it should not be overlooked that for all the supposed rivalry between African- and Irish-Americans, Dan set up Distressed Records with an African-American, with whom he reconciles at the end, and he is shown to be close friends with another member of this ethnic group.

Unless one knows *Once*, however, the ending of *Begin Again* may be rather difficult to prefigure, even though the attentive viewer may notice that both throughout the recording process and at the wrap party at Steve's, the only people with whom Gretta has any kind of social interaction are Dan, Violet, and Steve. Besides, at Troublegum's mansion (where, incidentally, a very British-like white butler in uniform greets them at the door), she neither goes in the pool with the Irish-American and Black men nor changes into a swimsuit. Instead, she remains seated on the edge of the pool and puts her feet in the water, pretending to blend in without having any real intention of doing so (52:32–53:02).

Finally, we can add that the larger budget and US setting of *Begin Again* allows it to come closer to the conventions of the folk musical and, therefore, to allow for more opportunities for music-based community building. It is not just that the band Dan forms is multi-ethnic; it is also that when he says he wants to put the sounds of the city into Gretta's album, he really means it. Consequently, many more onlookers and passers-by join the leads' performance in *Begin Again* than in *Once*. However, nowhere in the film is the sense of community brought about by music expressed more clearly than in the recordings of "Coming Up Roses" and especially "Tell Me If You Wanna Go Home." In the former, a group of initially hostile local street urchins are invited to join in and turn out to be an able supporting chorus. In the latter, regardless of the kind of feelings expressed in the lyrics, much of the lost harmony of the Mulligan family gets restored by, as Gretta herself says, turning the recording into "a family affair," in which Dan, Violet, and Miriam are assigned important roles—playing the bass, playing the guitar, and taking the still photographs, respectively.[98]

[98] Dan's past as a bassist obviously evokes Carney's own.

# 4. *Sing Street* (2016): The Coming-of-ager That Pretended It Was Just a Musical

> I'm trying something different with this. You don't want to see an exact replica of Once. It is similar, but I'm just experimenting with a few different muscles and seeing if I could do this. [...] it's about putting together a canon of work, and as a filmmaker, you take hints from audiences, screenings, and reviews, and you try and make a better film the next time, but it's an ongoing mission statement.[1]

Looking back on *Begin Again* in 2016, John Carney regretted that it had alienated those who liked the "low-budget, tattered quality" of *Once*.[2] However, rather than defending the film, he admitted that he himself had a feeling of unfinished business with it[3] and that had he been one of those people, he would most likely have said that he "sucked" and given him "a rap on the knuckles."[4] In fact, he fully understood why, despite the generally good reviews and notable box office returns, "some reviewers [and] audience members" had given him precisely that.[5] In many ways, then, *Sing Street* really was his attempt to *begin again*, to take a *mulligan* and remove the sour taste left by the Knightley vehicle, and to prove that he was not yet a sell-out and could still turn out a musical as authentic yet commercially viable as *Once*. That is, *Sing Street* was intended to fit into his musical triptych in much the same way as *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Spielberg, 1989) and *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (Abrams, 2019) in their respective franchises—as a fan-servicing closing chapter that would nostalgically bring back the pleasurable authenticity of the first instalment and make everyone forget the flaws of the second. As we discuss below, for the critics, *Sing Street* fulfilled these aims and was warmly reviewed as such. Unfortunately, for audiences and film professionals, it did not: It only

[1] "Sundance: John Carney."
[2] "Sundance: John Carney."
[3] Although nothing has come out of it yet, at the time, he also said that to get the monkey off his back, he was developing a TV series set in the same universe and centred on a Dan-like character who has a mental breakdown and returns to his first love: music ("The Insider #25: John Carney, director of the Oscar-winning *Once*, *Begin Again*, and *Sing Street*," interview by Brian Lloyd, *Insider*, March 16, 2016, video, 24:50–26:35, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CivVi-L5c58).
[4] "Sundance: John Carney."
[5] "Sundance: John Carney."

made €11.1 million worldwide[6] and won a total of just fifteen awards, none of them major, out of forty-six nominations.[7]

Carney first pitched *Sing Street* to producer Anthony Bregman while editing *Begin Again*, and audiences first heard about it not long after, in the winter of 2013–14. In a rather clever move, the filmmaker leveraged the promotional muscle of TWC and the star-studded cast of *Begin Again* to his advantage and started signing distribution deals for *Sing Street* at the Berlin Film Festival. Announced as a musical that would get its seal of authenticity by being loosely autobiographical, with unknowns as its leads, and entirely shot in Dublin with support from the IFB, it was nonetheless an $8 (€7.4) million project with professional actors in supporting roles, backed by Harvey Weinstein and other producers from the United States, Ireland, and Great Britain, and in which U2's Bono and The Edge were involved.[8] When filming commenced in autumn 2014, *Sing Street* had already been sold to over twenty countries, including the United States. As announced, the main roles were given to Irish teenagers with no previous acting experience, who Carney himself selected through open auditions with one main criterion in mind: They would have to look and sound like a school band built around Ferdia Walsh-Peelo, the 14-year-old he chose to play the protagonist at one of the first auditions. The cast was completed with the English starlet Lucy Boynton as the protagonist's love interest, and supporting roles by the established Irish actors Aidan Gillen, Maria Doyle Kennedy, and Jack Reynor.

Partly shot at Synge Street CBS in Dublin 8, *Sing Street* is about Conor (Walsh-Peelo), a teenager in mid-1980s recession Dublin who goes from a private to a rough school when his unhappily married parents can no longer afford to send him to the former. He feels like an outsider at the new school until he forms a band with other students and starts writing and performing songs and making music videos. Although he is bullied by Barry (Ian Kenny), a skinhead who is himself bullied

[6] "*Sing Street*," in *Box Office Mojo*, accessed May 9, 2022, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt3544112/.
[7] "*Sing Street*," in *IMDb*, accessed May 10, 2022, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3544112/.
[8] Asked by *Rolling Stone* about this involvement in June 2014, Carney said that they were "just musical advisors" but was hopeful that they could contribute at least a couple of songs to the soundtrack. He added that Bono had also "been very helpful with fleshing out the characters and the story." In the end, neither wrote any songs for *Sing Street*, but Bono, in a Troublegum-like move, publicly endorsed it upon release on U2's official website ("*Begin Again*'s John Carney").

at home,[9] and Brother Baxter (Don Wycherley), the school principal, his ultimate motivation to form the band is Raphina (Boynton), a beautiful, mysterious, slightly older girl who lives in a foster home across the street from the school and who dreams of moving to London and becoming a model. One afternoon, Conor plucks up the courage to speak to Raphina and tries to impress her by offering her the starring role in the next music video of the band he supposedly fronts. With the help of Darren (Ben Carolan), who takes on the role of manager, Conor quickly recruits the quirky, rabbit-obsessed multi-instrumentalist Eamon (Mark McKenna),[10] the keyboard player Ngig (Percy Chamburuka), the bassist Garry (Karl Rice), and the drummer Larry (Conor Hamilton) for the band. They start out playing covers of the 1980s hits that Conor watches on *Top of the Pops*. After Conor's elder brother Brendan (Reynor), a sour college drop-out who once dreamed of moving to Germany and becoming a rock star, encourages him to develop his—and the band's—own identity, they begin to explore different musical and aesthetic styles and write their own songs. As their technique and skills improve, they also manage to turn some of their songs into music videos using amateur audio-visual equipment and rundown clothes and prepare to play at the end-of-term school disco. In the meantime, the self-confidence that Conor has gained through the band allows him to stand up to Brother Baxter and Barry, to cope with the breakup of his parents, and to start a romantic relationship with Raphina, which comes to a sudden halt when she no-shows at a shoot and reveals that she had been planning to move to London with her older boyfriend Evan (Art Campion) while being with Conor. After patching things up at the school disco, the couple recklessly sail away to England on his grandfather's small, old boat, he expecting to make a career in music, and she one in modelling.

According to Carney, the possibility of making a loosely autobiographical movie about "a kid who dreams of forming a band and then he does it" had been "on the back-burner since *Once*."[11]

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[9] After this, in a rather unexpected twist, Conor befriends Barry and asks him to become the band's bouncer. The fact that Carney has said that the bully joining the band is "kind of an allegory for how […] there are a lot of tough people who work in the industry and how they got there" makes us wonder whether the character may have been inspired by the most (in)famous bully in the entertainment industry, Harvey Weinstein ("*Sing Street* Director John Carney Talks Brotherhood, Internet Addiction, and Writing '80s Pop," interview by Michael Roffman, *Consequence*, April 20, 2016, https://consequence.net/2016/04/interview-sing-street-director-john-carney/).

[10] We cannot help but wonder whether Eamon's rabbit obsession is a tongue-in-cheek allusion to *Rabbitte*, the family name of the protagonist character of *The Commitments.*

[11] Ed Power, "Music-driven comedy *Sing Street* will bring you back to the '80s," *Irish Examiner*, March 15, 2016, https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/arid-20387393.html.

However, it was not until much later that he began to flesh out the story after seeing a boy duo busking on a London underground carriage.[12] Although the early drafts focused on the band only, they already contained many of the autobiographical elements that made it into the final film. In the mid-1980s, the filmmaker "went from a sort of a tiny primary school"[13] to Synge Street CBS because he "couldn't get into a better school" and his parents could not afford to send him elsewhere.[14] The school was rough and made him feel anxious and out of place, but he tried to "disguise it and […] put on masks and […] put on accents."[15] Around 1984–85, he started to hang out with a group of other school misfits, including a "musical prodigy" called Eamon who "had all these instruments."[16] Knowing that he was neither a good student nor a jock, he decided to start a band with them to try "to impress [his] siblings."[17] Although the band failed to do so, Carney considers the decision to form it a life-changing moment that would define his life forever—a sort of big bang that gave him an identity, kept the bullies off him, made him visible to girls, and ultimately "led to everything else that turned out good in [his] life. It led to meeting Glen [Hansard] and being able to play bass, which led to playing in The Frames which led to film which led to *Once* which then led to [*Sing Street*]."[18] Also directly inspired by his teenage experiences are some of the scenes in which Conor is abused, those in which the band is shown going to school wearing different sets of clothes, the ones where Conor's family watches *Top of the Pops*, and the music video shooting sequences.[19] Finally, it should be noted that *Sing Street* is dedicated "for brothers everywhere." As said above, the shadow of Carney's late eldest brother Jim, who passed away in 2013 and who influenced the character of Dan in *Begin Again*, looms large over Brendan and especially the supportive, mentor-like relationship he has with Conor, which would likely have been modelled on the one the filmmaker had with his late brother as he was growing up.

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[12] "John Carney interview."
[13] "Newest Stealth Musical," 2:49–2:57.
[14] "*Sing Street* Director."
[15] "*Sing Street* Director."
[16] "*Sing Street* Director."
[17] "For *Sing Street*, Director John Carney Cast Musically-Oriented Non-Actors Who Could 'Drive It Like They Stole It,'" interview by Matt Grobar, *Deadline*, January 10, 2017, https://deadline.com/2017/01/sing-street-john-carney-the-weinstein-company-oscars-interview-1201871553/.
[18] "IFTN talks."
[19] In a scene that was finally edited out, Conor and his friends were shown stealing the school's camcorder, which was also based on such an event in Carney's life ("Empire Film Podcast," 42:20–43:20).

The remainder of the chapter begins with a general exploration of how *Sing Street* seeks to reconcile the opposing legacies of *Once* and *Begin Again* and avert the risk of being considered another remake of the former by taking what was generally agreed as the best of each and pouring it into a genre mould that Carney had only approached before in *On the Edge*: the coming-of-age film. After examining how the poster for *Sing Street* expresses this premise, we move on to considering the film's critical reception, especially how reviewers once again positioned it in a different mainstream genre from the one in which it was primarily marketed and systematically compared it to the filmmaker's previous musical films. Next, we examine the Hollywood coming-of-age film (sub)genre and how several (co-)productions adapted it to Irish settings throughout the 1990s to contribute to the promotion of Ireland as a tourist destination, to try to appeal to international mainstream audiences, and to reflect on Celtic Tiger Ireland. We also discuss how *Sing Street* builds on these precedents to narrate a coming-of-age story that both reflects on and gives hope to post-crash Ireland by nostalgically looking back on the harsh recession of the 1980s to show that the first seedlings of individual freedoms taken for granted in Ireland in 2015 came up from the rocky soil of Catholic nationalism in those years, and that dreams can come true even in the most adverse conditions—provided that one has talent and is willing to emigrate. Finally, we perform a formal analysis of the narrative and explore how the mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound design are used to construct a musical narrative, and how they build on, deviate, or simply reproduce those of *Once* and *Begin Again.*

## Film Marketing vs. Film Criticism: From Personal to Coming-of-Age Musical Dramedy

Despite its autobiographical component, *Sing Street* is by no means a biopic of John Carney and was never intended or marketed as such. If anything, it is a nostalgic, fairy-tale-esque coming-of-age teen film musical inspired by his high school years, an origin story of sorts that, out of many of the building blocks of *Once*, manages to construct a narrative that, unlike *Begin Again*, reminds the viewer of *Once* without ever looking like a remake. Even though it was not until 2016 that Carney started to speak openly about *Sing Street* as the wrap-up to his musical triptych, as early as July 2014,

he was already saying that *Sing Street* would be both related to and different from *Once* and *Begin Again*. Like them, it would be about "how music shapes your decisions and informs and helps you make up your mind about things"; unlike them, it was conceived to be "a kind of like an adventure musical" set "in the '80s in a school with a bunch of kids."[20]

After the film was complete and set for global release in early 2016, Carney began to explore the relationship between *Sing Street* and *Once* further, including the former's unique selling proposition. A significant part of the promotional campaign revolved around *Sing Street* being the last instalment of his musical triptych, a closing chapter that was said to be "almost like a prequel to *Once*" in that it shows how a musician like the Guy could have got into music purely by chance and/or based on a bluff aimed at impressing someone.[21] Moreover, although *Sing Street* looks at the same band-forming, song-writing, and recording processes showcased in *Once* and *Begin Again*, by devoting several sequences to how amateur music videos were made in the 1980s, Carney is able to bring something new to the viewer while rounding off the exploration of off-industry music production initiated in *Once*. Also in line with the idea of paying homage to while simultaneously expanding on *Once* is the fact that while the musical numbers in *Sing Street* "formed with the screenplay, a bit like the way *Once* worked,"[22] the soundtrack, like the one for *Begin Again*, features both pre-existing music and original songs: 1980s hits by, among others, Duran Duran, The Cure, Hall and Oates, Motörhead, The Jam, Joe Jackson, and M,[23] coupled with 1980s-flavoured, purpose-written tunes by Carney, Adam Levine, Glen Hansard, and Gary Clark, whom the filmmaker contacted because his band, Danny Wilson, was very popular in Ireland in the 1980s and he himself was a fan. Furthermore, *Sing Street* opened at Sundance, where *Once* had taken off nine years prior. As had occurred back then, too, the premiere screening after-party included what *Begin Again*'s at

[20] "Interview: *Once* Director."
[21] "Colorful Escapism."
[22] "Sundance: John Carney."
[23] Carney would have liked to put more 1980s songs in the film, but the copyright holders either did not give permission to do so or asked too much for the rights. By contrast, some bands licensed the songs at a reduced price because they liked the project, while Robert Smith asked Carney to donate to charity the clearance fee for "In Between Days" ("The Insider #25," 4:45–5:34).

TIFF could not due to Knightley's lack of musical skills: an acoustic live performance by the actors—the first of the many they would deliver to support the film's release over the following months.[24]

When one looks at the two most widely used one-sheets for *Sing Street* (figure 12), it seems clear that the marketing team was determined to avoid the mistakes made with *Begin Again*, starting with the blatant rip-off of the *Once* poster and the oxymoronic positioning of the advertised film as an indie (music-filled) star-driven rom-com similar to the Dublin-set movie. It is not that these posters do not construct *Sing Street* as a musical rom-com, or that they fail to acknowledge the connection with *Once* (and *Begin Again*). They do both. In V.1, *Sing Street* is said to be "From the Writer and Director of *ONCE* and *BEGIN AGAIN*," and the male lead is displayed playing a visually prominent guitar whose neck seems about to pop out. In V.2, *Sing Street* is presented as "a film by John Carney, director of *Once* and *Begin Again*," a guitar neck is part of the logo design, and the lead couple are framed in a frontal two-shot. In addition, while one of the review quotes in V.2 again mentions that Carney is the director of *Once*, another resorts to one of the adjectives most frequently used to describe *Begin Again*: *feel-good.* The fact that both compositions focus on a boy-girl couple sets expectations about *Sing Street* being a rom-com, which are further increased by the tagline "Boy meets girl," the opposites-attract contrast between her colourful clothes, makeup, and accessories and his dull, blackish garments, and the *back-to-backish* pose of the couple in V.1. Finally, although the tagline "Boy starts band" and the allusions to Carney, *Once*, and *Begin Again* position *Sing Street* as a musical, V.2 promises viewers "a more sophisticated *Commitments* with all the same charm" and "music by The Clash / A-Ha / Duran Duran / Genesis / Spandau Ballet / The Jam."

[24] Out of the five actors playing the members of the band, only two—Walsh-Peelo and McKenna, the ones who were really musically talented and have gone on to have careers in music and acting—delivered the concerts. Moreover, the covers and original songs in the film were recorded in advance by Walsh-Peelo with a band of professional session musicians at a studio. See, e.g., Adam B. Vary, "The New Movie with Insanely Catchy '80s Music," *BuzzFeed*, April 20, 2016, https://www.buzzfeed.com/adambvary/sing-street-the-riddle-of-the-model.

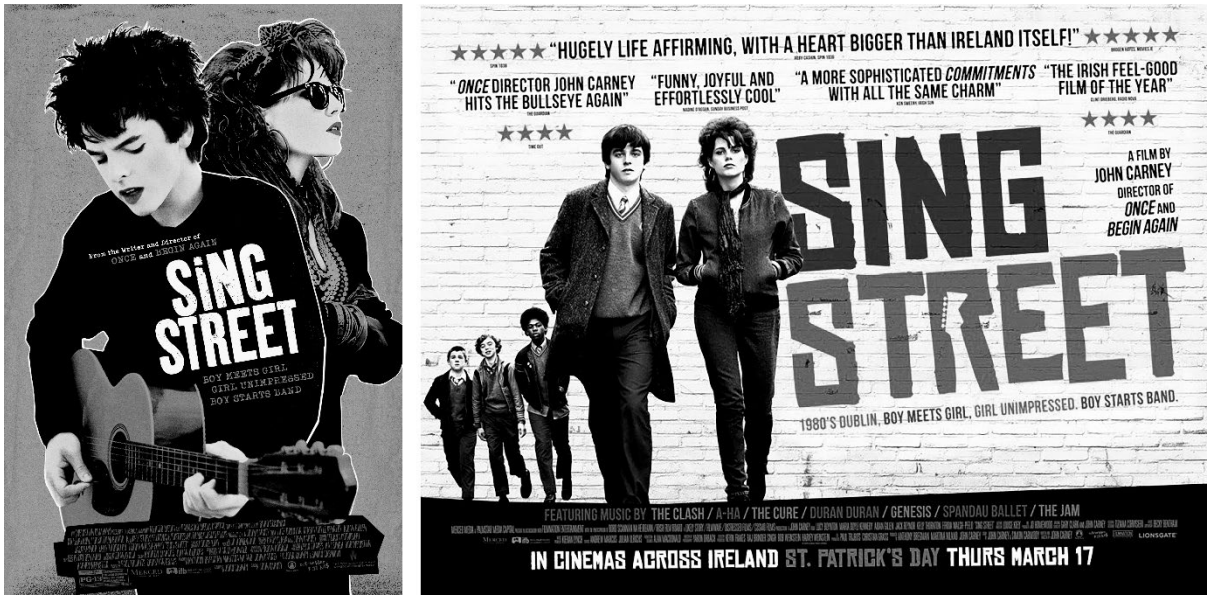


**Figure 12**. Posters for *Sing Street*: V.1 (left) and V.2 (right), Alamy. © 2016 Cosmo Films, Distressed Films, FilmNation Entertainment, FilmWave, Likely Story, PalmStar Media.

Unlike the poster for *Begin Again*, those for *Sing Street* preclude any expectations of it being a star-driven film. Despite Aidan Gillen, Maria Doyle Kennedy, Jack Reynor, and, arguably, Lucy Boynton holding (minor) star status by the time *Sing Street* was released, they are only listed in the billing block footer, and the areas conventionally used to highlight the stars in posters are either empty (V.1) or filled with the names of the bands on the soundtrack and selected positive ratings and review quotes (V.2). Indeed, the only member of the creative team who is given star status is John Carney, although such treatment is subordinated to his being the director (and writer) of *Begin Again* and *Once*, as signalled by the omission of his name and the use of small yellow caps to make the titles of his previous musicals stand out in V.1.

While highlighting a director's credentials in a poster normally allows the film to appeal to cine-sophisticated viewers familiar with their work, the opposite reception of *Once* and *Begin Again* among this segment, along with the resounding success of the latter with mass audiences, must have posed a marketing conundrum: how to convince the niche viewers who liked the modest Irish authenticity of *Once* as much as they despised *Begin Again* for its Hollywood slickness that *Sing Street* was a return to the essence of Carney's style without scaring away the many mainstream viewers who enjoyed *Begin Again* or creating the impression that *Sing Street* was merely another

remake of *Once.* They seem to have found a way out by creating posters that, on the one hand, acknowledge the legacy of *Once* and *Begin Again* but rely primarily on the advertised film itself to develop product identity. On the other hand, although the posters suggest that niche and mass audiences alike may find *Sing Street* enjoyable, they are even more geared towards associating it with another type of cross-over: that of films with wide age appeal.

We said before that the display of a male-female couple in the posters sets the expectation that *Sing Street* is a rom-com. Although this may be the case for a number of viewers, many more may notice that the couple is very young and assume that this is promotional material for a teen film. However, as they say, *one man's meat is another man's poison*, so while this genre label may act as a cue for younger audiences, it may have the opposite effect on adults. The posters try to offset this by adding the nostalgic recreation of the adult viewer's youth around the potential pleasures offered by the film, thereby ultimately positioning *Sing Street* in the coming-of-age (sub)genre. Anyone who lived through the 1980s will immediately realise that the poster design pays homage to the cut-out collages, often photocopied and hand-painted in gaudy colours, which illustrated amateur notices, flyers, fanzines, and album covers in those years. Should this pass unnoticed, V.1 shows Raphina and Conor wearing outfits inspired by the Madonna vehicle *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Seidelman, 1985) and The Cure's frontman Robert Smith, respectively. In V.2, although her bad girl, Joan Jett costume and his school uniform could well belong in the 1950s–60s, the linguistic message anchors the image and the advertised film in the 1980s and prompts the viewer to decode the costumes as an allusion to the 1950s nostalgia that permeated popular culture in that decade. Furthermore, when one looks at the poster from top to bottom, we find that *Sing Street* is first compared to *The Commitments*, also set in the 1980s and permeated by 1950s–60s nostalgia, then explicitly said to be set in "1980s Dublin," and finally associated with some of the most popular bands of the era.

As a side note, it is also worth mentioning that V.2, originally intended to promote *Sing Street* in Ireland and the United Kingdom, places a strong emphasis on connoting the film as Irish. It is not just that the movie's logo and tagline, as well as the lines highlighting the bands on the soundtrack and the release date, are written in the colours that make up the Irish flag. The terms *Irish* and *Ireland* can be found in two of the five review quotes, *Dublin* in the tagline, and *Ireland* and *St. Patrick's Day*

in the footer that highlight the film's opening in the Republic—not to speak of the fact that of all the possible public or bank holidays on which the film could have been released, the distributor scheduled it for March 17th, both the national day of Ireland and a global celebration of Irish culture and heritage. Nevertheless, contrary to what Martin McDonagh infamously implied in 2014, the marketing team considered the label *Irish* an asset in the promotion of *Sing Street*.[25] First, it allowed them to strengthen the message—also present in the poster—that the film is much closer to the authenticity of *Once* than it is to the artificiality of *Begin Again*, but without overtly repudiating the latter and risking alienating its mainstream fanbase. Second, in the months preceding the release of *Sing Street*, the consecutive successes of *The Lobster*, *Brooklyn*, and *Room*, three international co-productions with varying degrees of Irish creative and financial participation, yet marketed as Irish films, turned *Ireland* and *Irish* into trendy, seemingly bankable cinematic labels.

While the poster is explicit about the genres and movies on which viewers should build their expectations about *Sing Street*, Carney somewhat beat around the bush in promotional interviews. He would say that *Sing Street* was his musical most geared towards "entertainment and fun," the most intended for a wide audience as it was meant to appeal to younger and older audiences alike,[26] and the most honest (rather than autobiographical) as, unlike *Once*, it did not reflect "how [he] was feeling at the time [he] made it," but "how [he] felt when [he] was a kid in school."[27] Still convinced that "the term *musical* scares people off," he would insist that *Sing Street* was "another stealth musical […] where [he] hope[d] people w[ould] walk out of the cinema and go, 'Was that a musical?'".[28] He would also remark that he did not think *Sing Street* could be considered either a conventional coming-of-ager, as it was not told from the perspective of an adult narrator,[29] or a comedy, as it was a "truthful" film where the laughs came from the "kids putting on those shows together."[30] Moreover, while acknowledging his liking for US high school movies and the inevitable comparison with *The*

[25] See, e.g., Donald Clarke, "Director of *The Guard* says Irish films are not 'intelligent,'" *Irish Times*, September 15, 2014, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/director-of-the-guard-says-irish-films-are-not-intelligent-1.1929362.
[26] "Carney: 'I'll never.'"
[27] "John Carney interview."
[28] "Newest Stealth Musical," 2:14–2:28.
[29] "John Carney interview."
[30] "Sundance: John Carney."

*Commitments*, he would add that *Sing Street* was "quite original" and did not particularly reference any film.[31]

As with *Once* and *Begin Street*, most critics disagreed with Carney's labelling, and the consensus was that *Sing Street* primarily qualifies as a coming-of-age romance musical. They were, however, less unanimous on the film's blanket genre: Some called it a drama,[32] some a comedy,[33] and others used or implied the critically-coined blend *dramedy*.[34] Another widely shared view was that Carney surprisingly managed to concoct a most endearing, charming, enjoyable, and sincere story from elements seen before in many movies, including *Once* and *Begin Again*, and a bucketful of 1980s nostalgia. Apart from Carney's writing, the cast and soundtrack were often cited as the main successes of a film[35] that virtually all critics considered slightly flawed yet almost impossible not to fall for, if only because, unlike *Begin Again*, it "is a feel-good movie that never demands to be liked."[36] Taking this into account, it is hardly surprising that the film's Tomatometer ratings currently

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[31] "Colorful Escapism."

[32] See, e.g., Charlotte O'Sullivan, "*Sing Street*, film review: Pop kids of the Eighties get to grips with music, family, and love—in every quirky detail," *Evening Standard*, May 20, 2016, https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/film/sing-street-film-review-pop-kids-of-the-eighties-get-to-grips-with-music-family-and-love-in-every-quirky-detail-a3252826.html; Paul Whitington, "Film review–*Sing Street*: Musical drama hits all the right notes," *Irish Independent*, March 19, 2016, https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/movies/movie-reviews/film-review-sing-street-musical-drama-hits-all-the-right-notes-34550007.html.

[33] See, e.g., Ed Potton, "Film: *Sing Street*," *Times*, May 20, 2016, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/film-sing-street-l770wd5rj; Peter Bradshaw, "*Sing Street* review—pitch perfect Commitments-style school of rock," *Guardian*, May 19, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/may/19/sing-street-review.

[34] See, e.g., Brad Wheeler, "Low-budget musical *Sing Street* mixes realism with romanticism," *Globe and Mail*, April 22, 2016, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/film-reviews/low-budget-musical-sing-street-mixes-realism-with-romanticism/article29710085/; Olly Richards, "*Sing Street* Review," *Empire*, May 20, 2016, https://www.empireonline.com/movies/reviews/sing-street-review/; Tomris Laffly, "Film Review: *Sing Street*," *Film Journal International*, April 15, 2016, http://fj.webedia.us/reviews/film-review-sing-street.

[35] See, e.g., Bradshaw, "pitch perfect"; Ellen Murray, "Irish Film Review: *Sing Street*," *Film Ireland*, March 17, 2016, https://filmireland.net/2016/03/17/irish-film-review-sing-street/; Guy Lodge, "Sundance Film Review: *Sing Street*," *Variety*, January 25, 2016, https://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/sing-street-review-1201687683/#!; Michael Roffman, "Film Review: *Sing Street*," *Consequence*, April 12, 2016, https://consequence.net/2016/04/sxsw-film-review-sing-street/; Pete Hammond, "*Sing Street* Review: Director John Carney Scores Again with Ragtag Musical Charmer," *Deadline*, April 15, 2016, https://deadline.com/2016/04/sing-street-review-john-carney-musical-the-weinstein-company-1201738566/#!; Potton, "Film: *Sing Street*"; Tara Brady, "*Sing Street* review: A New Romantic vision of Dublin in the 1980s," *Irish Times*, March 17, 2016, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/sing-street-review-a-new-romantic-vision-of-dublin-in-the-1980s-1.2575675.

[36] Ann Hornaday, "*Sing Street* sets an Irish coming-of-age story to an '80s pop beat," *Washington Post*, April 21, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/sing-street-sets-an-irish-coming-of-age-story-to-an-80s-pop-beat/2016/04/21/16a94514-063a-11e6-a12f-ea5aed7958dc_story.html.

stand at 95% for critics and 92% for audiences,[37] and when one goes through each review, whenever a numerical or star rating is available, it is generally either four out of five or three out of four.[38]

Although a few reviewers spurned the association of *Sing Street* and *The Commitments*,[39] the fact that the former deals with the formation of a band of teenagers aiming at a better life in mid-1980s recession-hit Dublin was enough for a majority to consider it a junior, highly enjoyable (yet not as good) version of Parker's film. Furthermore, some even suggested that the connection is deliberately made explicit by casting Maria Doyle Kennedy, who also starred in *The Commitments*, as Conor's mum.[40] Albeit less frequently, critics also found similarities between *Sing Street* and the teen films of John Hughes,[41] plus those of Cameron Crowe,[42] and Wes Anderson;[43] the Irish-themed *Brooklyn*;[44] the British coming-of-agers *Gregory's Girl* (Forsyth, 1980)[45] and *Son of Rambow*

[37] "*Sing Street*," in *Rotten Tomatoes*, accessed May 10, 2022, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/sing_street.
[38] For 4/5 ratings, see, e.g., Bradshaw, "pitch perfect"; Daniel Anderson, "*Sing Street* Review," *Irish Examiner*, March 16, 2016, https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/arid-20387805.html; Harry Guerin, "*Sing Street*," *RTÉ*, March 19, 2016, https://www.rte.ie/entertainment/movie-reviews/2016/0218/768643-sing-street/; Jordan Hoffman, "*Sing Street* review—teen zero to hero in three chord wonder from *Once* director," *Guardian*, January 25, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jan/25/sing-street-review-teen-zero-to-hero-in-three-chord-wonder-from-once-director; Geoffrey McNab, "*Sing Street*, film review: 'A tremendous sing along that loses momentum,'" *Independent*, May 18, 2016, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/sing-street-film-review-a-tremendous-sing-along-that-loses-momentum-a7035531.html; Joshua Rothkopf, "*Sing Street*," *Time Out*, January 26, 2016, https://www.timeout.com/movies/sing-street; O'Sullivan, "Pop kids"; Potton, "Film: *Sing Street*"; Richards, "*Sing Street* Review." For 3/4 ratings, see, e.g., Moira MacDonald, "*Sing Street*: a high-school fairy tale from the director of *Once*," *Seattle Times*, April 28, 2016, https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/movies/sing-street-a-high-school-fairy-tale-from-the-director-of-once/; Peter Travers, "*Sing Street*," *Rolling Stone*, April 13, 2016, https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/sing-street-125992/; Rex Reed, "*Sing Street* Is an Homage to the '80s and a Tale of Deprivation," *Observer*, April 14, 2016, https://observer.com/2016/04/sing-street-is-an-homage-to-the-80s-and-a-tale-of-deprivation/.
[39] Brian Truitt, "Review: *Sing Street* is a tuneful retro classic," *USA Today*, April 14, 2016, https://eu.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2016/04/14/review-sing-street-movie/82953010/; Whitington, "Musical drama."
[40] David Rooney, "*Sing Street*: Film Review. Sundance 2016," *Hollywood Reporter*, January 25, 2016, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/sing-street-sundance-review-859188/; Harvey O'Brien, "Turn and Face the Strange: *Sing Street* (John Carney 2016)," *Estudios Irlandeses* 12 (2017): 277, https://doi.org/10.24162/EI2017-7365; Roffman, "Film Review"; Wheeler, "Low-budget musical."
[41] Amy O'Connor, "Here's why everyone is raving about this Irish film this morning," *Daily Edge*, February 19, 2016, https://www.dailyedge.ie/sing-street-adiff-2612986-Feb2016/; Reed, "Homage to the '80s"; Truitt, "retro classic."
[42] Reed, "Homage to the '80s."
[43] O'Sullivan, "Pop kids."
[44] Reed, "Homage to the '80s."
[45] McNab, "sing along"; O'Sullivan, "Pop kids."

(Jennings, 2007),[46] and the Swedish *We Are the Best!* (Moodyson, 2014), another film about a teen band that was also often said to be better, if only because it eschews fantasy.[47]

Nonetheless, *Sing Street* was most typically qualitatively measured against Carney's previous musicals. Whereas a few reviewers contended that *Sing Street* was either his best[48] or worst film to date,[49] the vast majority considered it to be (nearly) as good as *Once*. What is more, depending on their assessment of *Begin Again*, *Sing Street* was positioned as either the icing on the filmmaker's three-layered sweet musical cake[50] or, more frequently, as a much-needed course correction, back-to-basics move after the not-so-good NYC-set film.[51] Either way, *Sing Street* was said to differ from *Once* and *Begin Again* primarily in that the characters were much younger, the story was more autobiographical and personal, and the whole film was striated with a feeling of nostalgia. Other, less frequently mentioned differences were that *Sing Street* was "more lightweight"[52] and "far more boisterous and […] funnier" than *Once*,[53] "glossier than *Once* and more familiar than *Begin Again*,"[54] and more music-centred[55] and exuberant,[56] yet less "soulful or inventive,"[57] than either *Once* or *Begin*

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[46] McNab, "sing along"; Richards, "*Sing Street* Review."
[47] See Alan Scherstuhl, "Eighties Musical *Sing Street* Captures the Thrill of Kids Becoming Selves," *Village Voice*, April 13, 2016, https://www.villagevoice.com/2016/04/13/eighties-musical-sing-street-captures-the-thrill-of-kids-becoming-selves/; Bradshaw, "pitch perfect"; Hoffman, "teen zero"; Lodge, "Sundance Film Review"; O'Sullivan, "Pop kids"; Rothkopf, "*Sing Street*"; Sheila O'Malley, "*Sing Street*," *Roger Ebert*, April 15, 2016, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/sing-street-2016.
[48] Ailbhe O'Reilly, "ADIFF Irish Film Review: *Sing Street*," *Film Ireland*, February 19, 2016, https://filmireland.net/2016/02/19/adiff-irish-film-review-sing-street/; Whitington, "Musical drama."
[49] Scott Marks, "*Sing Street*," *San Diego Reader*, April 21, 2016, https://www.sandiegoreader.com/movies/sing-street/.
[50] See, e.g., Alonso Duralde, "*Sing Street* Review: John Carney Tunes Up Another Sweet Musical Romance," *The Wrap*, April 14, 2016, https://www.thewrap.com/sing-street-review/; Guerin, "*Sing Street*"; Travers, "*Sing Street.*"
[51] See, e.g., A. A. Dowd, "The director of *Once* returns to his '80s-rock youth with the earnest *Sing Street*," *AV Club*, April 14, 2016, https://www.avclub.com/the-director-of-once-returns-to-his-80s-rock-youth-wit-1798187376; Christopher Orr, "*Sing Street* Is a Winsome, Infectious Pop Fantasy," *The Atlantic*, April 21, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/04/sing-street-review-john-carney/479232/; Daniel Crooke, "Review: *Sing Street*," *Film Experience*, April 17, 2016, http://thefilmexperience.net/blog/2016/4/17/review-sing-street.html; David Ehrlich, "*Sing Street* Review: John Carney Delivers *Once* Again," *IndieWire*, April 14, 2016, https://www.indiewire.com/2016/04/sing-street-review-john-carney-delivers-once-again-289992/; Kyle Smith, "*Sing Street* is a sweet ode to New Wave youth," *New York Post*, April 14, 2016, https://nypost.com/2016/04/14/sing-street-is-a-sweet-ode-to-new-wave-youth/; Laffly, "Film Review"; O'Sullivan, "Pop kids"; Scherstuhl, "Eighties Musical."
[52] Orr, "Pop Fantasy."
[53] Bilge Ebiri, "Music Doesn't Save in *Sing Street*, But It Does Sate," *Vulture*, January 25, 2016, https://www.vulture.com/2016/01/sundance-review-sing-streets-musical-heart.html.
[54] Teo Bugbee, "*Sing Street* Gets It," *MTV*, April 15, 2016, https://www.mtv.com/news/2868330/sing-street-gets-it/.
[55] Whitington, "Musical drama."
[56] Richards, "*Sing Street* Review."

*Again.* Some reviewers also proposed that *Sing Street* was somewhat stylistically different. For instance, Olly Richards of *Empire* and David Ehrlich of *IndieWire* related this to the fact that, in their opinion, the narrative had to make room for fantasy sequences (and amateur music videos) absent from *Begin Again* and *Once*.[58] Daniel Crooke argued in *Film Experience* that in *Sing Street*, Carney "visually transcend[s] his boundless romanticism into a reflective style,"[59] and David Rooney lamented in the *Hollywood Reporter* that the transitions between threads are pretty rough—incidentally, a point that Ehrlich also made in his review.[60] Furthermore, the original music, created diegetically by young amateurs on their way to becoming artists rather than pre-trained musicians,[61] was occasionally said to have abandoned the acoustic sincerity found in *Once* and *Begin Again* to "embrace the high artifice and self-conscious irony of early and mid-80s mostly British pop,"[62] rather than being "messed up" by "passing trucks or car alarms" when performed outdoors.[63] Finally, *Sing Street* also differed from *Once* and *Begin Again* in that it was "expressly a love story and not one between musicians."[64]

When it comes to the similarities, leaving aside the fact that *Once*, *Begin Again*, and *Sing Street* are all endearing, crowd-pleasing, happy-sad musicals, the reviews tended to focus on the narrative importance of scenes showing the ins and outs of song-writing, and how Carney closely intertwines them, the songs, and the performances with an emotional love story and some comedy elements. Carney's films were otherwise said to be mainly about the power of music to elevate people and allow them to intimately connect with others and reach out for something better, particularly in moments of desperation.[65]

Both the main and supporting cast were rapturously praised in reviews, especially the protagonist trio. Critics highlighted that, despite being a newcomer, Ferdia Walsh-Peelo delivers a

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[57] Lodge, "Sundance Film Review."
[58] Ehrlich, "Carney Delivers"; Richards, "*Sing Street* Review."
[59] Crooke, "Review: *Sing Street*."
[60] Rooney, "*Sing Street*."
[61] A. O. Scott, "Review: *Sing Street* Is an '80s Love Affair, Hair Gel Required," *New York Times*, April 15, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/15/movies/review-sing-street-is-an-80s-love-affair-hair-gel-required.html.
[62] Bugbee, "*Sing Street* Gets It"; Scott, "80s Love Affair."
[63] Duralde, "John Carney Tunes."
[64] Lodge, "Sundance Film Review."
[65] See, e.g., Duralde, "John Carney Tunes"; O'Malley, "*Sing Street*"; Roffman, "Film Review"; Rooney, "*Sing Street*"; Whitington, "Musical drama."

spotless, naturalistic, and engaging performance that blends innocence, cheekiness, and charisma. Although Daniel Anderson questioned the suitability of her accent and age in the *Irish Examiner*,[66] Lucy Boynton was also generally said to shine as Raphina, the world-weary, out-of-your-league muse who turns out to be more vulnerable and innocent than expected. More importantly, some pointed to the oddball chemistry between her and Walsh-Peelo as one of the film's charms,[67] with a few going as far as suggesting that such chemistry allows the film to get away with going full fantasy at the end.[68]

Despite the kudos for Boynton, Raphina herself and her romance with Conor were not so well-liked.[69] A. A. Dowd, for instance, argued that the romance and coming-of-age subplots never work as well as the making-the-band one because she "never stops looking like a crush object" who will never love you back, which in turn makes the "fairy-tale courtship seem a little canned."[70] In a similar vein, Alan Scherstuhl opined that she is "maddeningly mercurial" and "sometimes seems to serve the script's need for occasional crises rather than her own agenda."[71] By contrast, others celebrated that, despite this being a boy-centred film, Raphina and Conor's mum are constructed as real people with inner lives rather than types.[72] What is more, Nathaniel Rogers of the *Film Experience* and Sheila O'Malley of *Roger Ebert* even related this to the fact that Carney, unlike other directors, does care about *all* his characters regardless of the screen time he is able to allow them,[73] as illustrated by the scene where Conor and Brendan watch their mother sipping a glass of wine in the afternoon sun, which is sufficient to convey the depth of her tragedy.[74]

Nevertheless, rather than that of Conor's mum, the tragedy that most often caught the reviewers' attention is Brendan's, the character to whom many attributed much of the melancholic undertone in a film "For Brothers Everywhere." Critics were divided between those who believed that

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[66] Anderson, "*Sing Street* Review."
[67] Duralde, "John Carney Tunes"; Scherstuhl, "Eighties Musical"; Truitt, "retro classic."
[68] Lodge, "Sundance Film Review"; Rooney, "*Sing Street*"; Whitington, "Musical drama."
[69] See, e.g., Dowd, "80s-rock youth"; Lodge, "Sundance Film Review"; Rooney, "*Sing Street*."
[70] Dowd, "80s-rock youth."
[71] Scherstuhl, "Eighties Musical."
[72] See, e.g., Bugbee, "*Sing Street* Gets It"; Katie Walsh, "Review: *Sing Street* cranks up great pop music and one young man's dreams," *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 2016, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-sing-street-review-20160415-story.html; Laffly, "Film Review"; Nathaniel Rogers, "Who or what is the MVP of *Sing Street*?" *Film Experience*, May 19, 2016, http://thefilmexperience.net/blog/2016/5/19/who-or-what-is-the-mvp-of-sing-street.html.
[73] Rogers, "MVP of *Sing Street*"; O'Malley, "*Sing Street*."
[74] See, e.g., Ebiri, "Music Doesn't Save"; Roffman, "Film Review"; Whitington, "Musical drama."

*Sing Street* is as much about romantic love as it is about brotherly love[75] and those to whom the most important relationship is by far the latter.[76] Aided by what was universally regarded as a top-notch, scene-stealing performance by Jack Reynor, Brendan's redemptive mentoring of Conor, the backstory of failure and disillusionment behind his wisecracking, Seth Rogen-like stoner facade,[77] and its eventual peeling-back in a moving confession scene, were often cited among the strengths of *Sing Street*.[78] In fact, only Rogers, for whom the character "feels like a screenplay construct rather than a human being," saw Brendan in a negative light.[79] Conversely, despite what some critics said about Carney caring about all his characters, a number of them—while complimenting the work of the young actors who play the band members (especially Mark McKenna as Eamon,[80] who was also sometimes said to be the Lennon to Conor's McCartney[81])—complained that these characters were somewhat underdeveloped.[82] For their part, Pete Hammond of *Deadline* and Scott Marks of the *San Diego Reader* claimed that this was also the case with Barry and Brother Baxter.[83]

The soundtrack also received universal acclaim. The original songs were typically described as catchy, delightful, hummable pastiches—or, for Alan Scherstuhl of the *Village Voice* and Walter Addiego of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, parodies[84]—of tunes from the era in which the story is set (especially by British New Romantic bands), with the highest praise going to "The Riddle of the Model" and "Drive It Like You Stole It." However delightful the original songs, a few reviewers argued that they are much too good from the start and, although they were willing to forgive the flaw

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[75] See, e.g., Hoffman, "teen zero"; Richards, "*Sing Street* Review."
[76] See, e.g., Lodge, "Sundance Film Review"; O'Malley, "*Sing Street*"; Roffman, "Film Review."
[77] The likening to Rogen is at least brought up in Dowd, "80s-rock youth"; Duralde, "John Carney Tunes"; Orr, "Pop Fantasy"; and Steven Rea, "*Sing Street*: '80s-flavored rock 'n roll love story," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 22, 2016, https://www.inquirer.com/philly/entertainment/movies/20160422__Sing_Street____80s-flavored_rock__n_roll_love_story.html. However, Reynor has said that, following his suggestion, they based the look of the character on Pink Floyd's David Gilmour (FilmNation Entertainment, "*Sing Street*: Notas de Producción," *Vértigo Films*, January 24, 2017, https://www.vertigofilms.es/download/pressbook-sing-street/).
[78] See, e.g., Hoffman, "teen zero"; Roffman, "Film Review"; Rooney, "*Sing Street*"; Walter Addiego, "Review: *Sing Street* a pleasant music tale," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 12, 2016, https://www.timesunion.com/tuplus-features/article/Review-Sing-Street-a-pleasant-music-tale-7465109.php.
[79] Rogers, "MVP of *Sing Street*."
[80] See, e.g., Brady, "New Romantic vision"; O'Sullivan, "Pop kids"; Travers, "*Sing Street*."
[81] Addiego, "pleasant music tale"; O'Reilly, "ADIFF Irish Film"; Rea, "80s-flavored rock"; Truitt, "retro classic."
[82] See Anderson, "*Sing Street* Review"; Lodge, "Sundance Film Review"; Rooney, "*Sing Street*"; Scherstuhl, "Eighties Musical."
[83] Hammond, "Carney Scores"; Marks, "*Sing Street*."
[84] Addiego, "pleasant music tale"; Scherstuhl, "Eighties Musical."

(or even consider it an intentional joke),[85] they could not help pointing out that the fact that the band "is almost as good as the groups that inspire them"[86] somehow mars the film with implausibility.[87] A number of others questioned, albeit often so mildly that the questioning turned into matter-of-fact comment, the speed and ease with which the boys become (pass)able musicians.[88] Much more occasionally, the production values of the videos[89] and the studio sound quality of the songs[90] also raised eyebrows.

Nonetheless, most critics considered that *Sing Street* maintained an appropriate balance between virtuosity and amateurism, and that it deftly conveyed, both visually and aurally, a sense of artistic and personal progression from the purely imitative "The Riddle of the Model" to the self-assured, climactic "Drive It Like You Stole It." On a visual level, this is channelled through montages showing the kids sporting different DIY costumes, makeup, and hairstyles after their musical idols of the week, whose tracks and videos serve as musical accompaniment to and then inspiration for the band's own. Considered one of the highlights of the film, the montages fit as much in the no-nostalgia futurism—which, as a few reviewers noted, is pleasurably read by Gen X audiences in exactly the opposite way[91]—on which Conor bluffingly says his musical style is based early in the film as they do in the intense, quick, self-searching process of real-life adolescents. Closely related to this, a handful of critics noted that Raphina's arc is also underscored by her costumes and makeup,[92] with the character growing "younger and more vulnerable […] as the layers of makeup come off,"[93] "eventually even showing her bare face as a bruised teenage girl with shattered dreams."[94]

For most reviewers, oddly for a musical, another balance that *Sing Street* manages to maintain is that between realism and romanticism. On the one hand, it exposes the viewer to several ugly

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[85] Ehrlich, "Carney Delivers."
[86] Ehrlich, "Carney Delivers."
[87] See Bradshaw, "pitch perfect"; Ehrlich, "Carney Delivers"; Lodge, "Sundance Film Review"; Scherstuhl, "Eighties Musical"; Wheeler, "Low-budget musical."
[88] See Brady, "New Romantic vision"; Dowth, "80s-rock youth"; Duralde, "John Carney Tunes"; Ebiri, "Music Doesn't Save"; Hoffman, "teen zero"; Hornaday, "pop beat"; Orr, "Pop Fantasy"; Roffman, "Film Review"; Rooney, "*Sing Street*"; Smith, "New Wave youth"; Truitt, "retro classic."
[89] Bradshaw, "pitch perfect."
[90] See, e.g., Murray, "Irish Film Review"; Scott, "80s Love Affair."
[91] See, e.g., Roffman, "Film Review."
[92] Hornaday, "pop beat"; O'Brien, "Face the Strange," 276; Walsh, "young man's dreams."
[93] Walsh, "young man's dreams."
[94] O'Brien, "Face the Strange," 276.

realities of 1980s Dublin, particularly a decayed urban landscape, marital strife, poverty, abuse, racism, a lack of prospects, and disillusionment.[95] On the other, this exposure is tempered—perhaps too much for Tara Brady of the *Irish Times*, who opined that Dublin looked much worse in the 1980s[96]—by the filmmaker's nostalgia, his often dark, quirky, Irish sense of humour,[97] and the fact that "this is an aspirational musical from a born crowd-pleaser."[98] Accordingly, in *Sing Street*, "music is a lifeline, a way to find happiness in sadness,"[99] to "face the hardships of family, first love, and school bullies,"[100] and to eventually go in search of a better future in London.[101]

Although the fantasy reaches a crescendo as the narrative progresses, it is kept grounded for *most* of the running length. The ending, however, was typically regarded as pure fantasy and, besides, utterly dissimilar to those of *Begin Again* and *Once*, mainly because the young couple stays together.[102] While few reviewers found it entirely satisfying,[103] most condoned it, if only because *Sing Street* is a crowd-pleasing teen film told from the perspective of a teenager that keeps demanding viewers to dream big, be bold, and not succumb to despair.[104] The final journey may be "dangerous, possibly suicidal, arguably symbolic," but it is nevertheless "certainly metaphorically necessary"[105] to complete Brendan's redemption, to make Conor's (and Raphina's) dreams come true, and, most importantly, to prevent the film from betraying its own wish-fulfilling, forward-looking message. Ultimately, if Conor and Raphina want to at least attempt not to end up like the adults around them (or Brendan, for that matter), they simply must leave.[106]

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[95] See Anderson, "*Sing Street* Review"; Crooke, "Review: *Sing Street*"; Ehrlich, "Carney Delivers"; Guerin, "*Sing Street*"; O'Malley, "*Sing Street*"; O'Reilly, "ADIFF Irish Film"; Orr, "Pop Fantasy"; Richards, "*Sing Street* Review"; Rothkopf, "*Sing Street*"; Scott, "80s Love Affair"; Travers, "*Sing Street.*"
[96] Brady, "New Romantic vision."
[97] See, e.g., MacDonald, "high-school fairy tale"; O'Malley, "*Sing Street*."
[98] Scherstuhl, "Eighties Musical."
[99] Travers, "*Sing Street*."
[100] Walsh, "young man's dreams."
[101] Duralde, "John Carney Tunes."
[102] Out of the tens of reviews consulted for this study, only Bilge Ebiri's in *Vulture* observes that "not unlike *Once*, [*Sing Street*] even closes on an open-ended note" (Ebiri, "Music Doesn't Save").
[103] Among the few who do are Bradshaw, "pitch perfect"; Ehrlich, "Carney Delivers"; Laffly, "Film Review"; and O'Reilly, "ADIFF Irish Film."
[104] See, e.g., Hoffman, "teen zero"; MacDonald, "high-school fairy tale"; O'Malley, "*Sing Street*"; Smith, "New Wave youth."
[105] O'Brien, "Face the Strange," 279.
[106] Bradshaw, "pitch perfect"; O'Brien, "Face the Strange," 277, 279; Roffman, "Film Review."

Considered from a different viewpoint, the ending also emerges as narratively coherent with the successive attempts at inhabiting the fantasy of the *Top of the Pops* videos through the comically rough clips that the band shoots throughout the film, and especially the imaginary *Back-to-the-Future*-like prom sequence in which they are often said to culminate, where we first transcend reality and go inside Conor's head.[107] For the duration of the sequence, Conor and the viewer fully inhabit the former's wish-fulfilment fantasy: a music video with high production values[108] where all his home, love, and school problems are magically solved.[109] Furthermore, for Crooke, the ending naturally emerges from this sequence, as from the moment we return to reality, "we don't just feel misery for things not working out; we cling onto that hope as a driving force."[110] Although not every critic was able to identify the allusion to the famous Zemeckis film,[111] both the prom and, despite the sporadic complaints about their perceived slickness, the amateur videos were generally warmly received.

## *Sing Street*, Nostalgia, and the Coming-of-Age Film (Sub)genre[112]

We said above that Carney began to develop the story after seeing a couple of boys busking on the London Underground. Nevertheless, the songs and the screenplay were ultimately fleshed out from "an iPhone full of tunes and lyrics and half written ideas" that came from a personal reflection on his path to becoming a successful filmmaker and "needed to go somewhere."[113] They were also influenced by the uncertainties and insecurities that he and his partner were feeling while "trying to have a baby" at the time[114] and the realisation that, having reached his 40s, he was starting to look back on his school years "with less horror and more romance and affection"[115] and to regard the 1980s in Dublin as a belated equivalent of the 1960s in the United States, Great Britain, or France—that is, a

[107] Hoffman, "teen zero"; Smith, "New Wave youth."
[108] Scherstuhl, "Eighties Musical."
[109] Crooke, "Review: *Sing Street*"; Rooney, "*Sing Street*."
[110] Crooke, "Review: *Sing Street*."
[111] Among those that do not are Crooke, "Review: *Sing Street*"; Hornaday, "pop beat," and Orr, "Pop Fantasy."
[112] Parts of this section were originally published in Carlos Menéndez-Otero, "Cowboys and kings: The coming-of-age film in 1990s Irish cinema," *CINEJ Cinema Journal* 5, no. 1 (2015): 4–33, https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2015.123.
[113] "Carney: 'I'll never.'"
[114] "Carney: 'I'll never.'"
[115] "Carney talks '80s."

period of sexual and fashion liberation in which the authority of the Church began to be challenged.[116] However, when asked by *Film Ireland* whether the period setting was intended as a reflection on Ireland's economically troubled present, while acknowledging that the tolerant Ireland of the 2010s had its roots in the 1980s, Carney misleadingly said that he had chosen it simply because he did not really know the tastes of kids in 2015 and that the recession shows up in the film only because it was necessary for a plausible portrayal of 1985 Dublin.[117]

Regardless, *Sing Street* is traversed by the unmistakably adult feeling of nostalgia and, like *Once* or *Begin Again*, largely reflects the anxieties through which the filmmaker was going when he made it. Moreover, while it can certainly be labelled a modern-day musical dramedy and does not check every box for a (New) Hollywood coming-of-ager, the combination of adult nostalgia and a teen story set in a remembered, not-so-distant past that reflects on the origins of the target audience's present firmly places it in the latter (sub)genre, as so many critics were quick to point out on its release.

Should anyone be asked what a coming-of-age film is, the answer that would most likely come to mind is *teen film*. The two (sub)genres are closely related to each other, if only because the protagonist in both is a character who target audiences can unmistakably regard, by age and/or behaviour, as adolescent. In her study on the genre, Catherine Driscoll considers as teen film, among others, movies as diverse as *Love Finds Andy Hardy* (Seitz, 1938), *The Wild One* (Benedek, 1953), *Rebel without a Cause* (Kazan, 1955), *Gidget* (Wendkos, 1959), *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1971), *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973), *National Lampoon's Animal House* (Landis, 1978), *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985), *Stand by Me* (Reiner, 1986), *Scream* (Craven, 1996), and *Almost Famous* (Crowe, 2000).[118] Certainly, all these titles qualify as teen film, yet only those in which the ultimate goal of the hero's journey[119] is to complete the transition from childhood to adulthood—as in *American Graffiti*—would rightfully belong in the coming-of-age (sub)genre.

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[116] "From *Once* to *Sing Street*"; "Video interview: John Carney, director of *Sing Street*," interview by Deirdre Molumby, *Film Ireland*, March 18, 2016, video, 6:00–6:35, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lt0Q20pjLzo.
[117] "Video interview: John Carney," 5:00–6:00.
[118] Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Berg, 2011).
[119] See Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*, 3rd ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007); Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008).

The origins of the coming-of-ager lie in the remarkably similar three-stage—separation, liminality, and incorporation—rituals with which most world cultures mark the transitional phase between childhood and full adult inclusion into a social group. Such rituals, which Arnold van Gennep first called *rites of passage* in 1909, have existed since at least 40,000 BC, although it was not until the late eighteenth century that the individual dimension of the transition was first regarded. This was followed by the emergence of the *Bildungsroman*, "a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood."[120] Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1794) is often cited as the first in the (sub)genre, which also includes Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861), Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), among countless others.

In the 1950s, unprecedented affluence, baby-booming, and the universalization of secondary education ushered in a distinctive mass-produced teen culture in the United States, which post-studio Hollywood reflected and shaped in films such as *The Wild One*, *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955), and *Rebel without a Cause*.[121] As youth-obsessed boomers resisted adulthood, the hope of the Kennedy era faded into the realities of the Vietnam War, civil rights turmoil, corruption in the Nixon administration, and economic recession. Boomers reacted to these traumatic events by looking nostalgically to their childhood and adolescence, idealising the 1950s and early 1960s as a paradise lost or golden age to which later-twentieth-century popular culture would turn to "find/construct sources of identity, agency, or community, that are felt to be lacking, blocked, subverted, or threatened in the present."[122]

New Hollywood teen films, such as *American Graffiti* and *Big Wednesday* (Milius, 1978), added an *et in Arcadia ego* encounter with death to the rites of passage reified in the (sub)genre since the 1950s, namely "losing one's virginity, graduating from high school, [...] using alcohol or other drugs for the first time," and taking "some sort of decision, the outcome of which will have a

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[120] "Bildungsroman," in *Wikipedia*, accessed July 28, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bildungsroman.
[121] Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).
[122] Stuart Tannock, "Nostalgia critique," *Cultural Studies* 9, no. 3 (1995): 454.

significant shaping impact on the rest of [the characters'] lives."[123] While in coming-of-age series, we normally follow the characters as they pass through their high school years (e.g., *Dawson's Creek* [1998–2003]), coming-of-age films tend to negotiate these rituals over a night, a weekend, a few days, or some weeks in the summer break between academic years. These narratives usually progress towards a dramatic climax in which the protagonist must decide whether they will leave for college/work or stay in the "youthful comfort zone" of the family home.[124]

A cultural encapsulation of conflicting boomer desires to return to the paradise lost or accept the inevitability of change, New Hollywood teen films typically take the form of coming-of-age memoirs that nostalgically recreate small-town, mid-century America through the buffer of an adult homodiegetic narrator,[125] who omnisciently recounts the past from the target audience's troubled present. Nevertheless, the narrator's subjectivity (often made explicit in voiceover) and "the viewers' foreknowledge of the represented events as contrary to expectations" ultimately undermine the remembered past's claims to historical objectivity and coat them with a layer of irony that "always involves a 'chiasmic' reversing of time: the present contrarily anticipated in the past, the future contrarily anticipated in the present."[126] In fact, like Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), these films usually dramatize the birth of a new, unstable social order within the old and, therefore, bittersweetly end up conceding that the remembered past was not so idyllic after all.[127]

The coming-of-age film had a golden age of its own in Ireland during the 1990s—at least in terms of output. Between 1990 and 1999, and particularly in 1995–6, a myriad of Irish-themed, often Irish co-produced coming-of-agers and films with coming-of-age subplots came out, including *The Miracle* (Jordan, 1991), *Into the West* (Newell, 1992), *Circle of Friends* (O'Connor, 1995), *The Run of the Country* (Yates, 1995), *Korea* (Black, 1995), *Moondance* (Hirtz, 1995), *The Last of the High*

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[123] Levi Fox, "Were Those the Days? Historical Coming-of-Age Films in American Culture" (Course notes for the American Studies Program, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, 2002), http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG02/fox/home.html.
[124] Fox, "Were Those the Days?"
[125] Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 245.
[126] Warwick Mules, "Seminar 9: Youth, Coming of Age, Irony and Nostalgia" (Course notes for CULT 11011, Central Queensland University, Rockhampton, 2001), 1, https://web.archive.org/web/20031120171734/http://www.ahs.cqu.edu.au/humanities/litculture/cult11011/pdf/Seminar9.pdf.
[127] Jordi Balló and Xavier Pérez, *La semilla inmortal: Los argumentos universales en el cine* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1997), 115–24.

*Kings* (Keating, 1996), *The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars* (Creed, 1996), *Spaghetti Slow* (Jalongo, 1996), *The Disappearance of Finbar* (Clayton, 1996), *The Butcher Boy* (Jordan, 1997), *Drinking Crude* (McPolin, 1998), *This Is My Father* (Quinn, 1998), *Sunburn* (Hume, 1999), and *Angela's Ashes* (Parker, 1999). Most were commercially unsuccessful, and some even failed to get distribution abroad, so the coming-of-age film was replaced by the rom-com as the staple of Irish cinema at the dawn of the new century. Although the rom-com craze turned out to be rather short-lived, the coming-of-age (sub)genre did not re-emerge in Ireland until 2016, when *Sing Street*, *Handsome Devil* (Butler, 2016), *A Date for Mad Mary* (Thornton, 2016), and *The Young Offenders* opened within months of each other—a remarkable fact given that almost as many had been released in the previous fifteen years: *On the Edge*, *Disco Pigs* (Sheridan, 2001), *Turning Green* (Aimette and Hofmann, 2005), *32A* (Quinn, 2007), and *Kisses* (Daly, 2008).

Writing at the peak of the Irish coming-of-age film craze, Keith Hopper wondered in his review of *The Last of the High Kings* why "so many Irish films are obsessed with coming-of-age narratives." By way of answer, he argued that

> […] it has something to do with the evolutionary state of Irish cinema; not quite in its infancy but only just out of short pants. In this case though I suspect it's partially to do with its literary origins. Many first novels tend to be semi-autobiographical and naively nostalgic, a dubious yearning for the long hot summers of our beautiful youth, etc. On film such nostalgia provides a certain retro chic: We can legitimately wince at the fashions (and marvel at how sophisticated we've become), while at the same time thrill to the sounds of the old rock gods.[128]

However appropriate, Hopper's argument fails to capture the economics of the (sub)genre in the context of 1990s Irish cinema. First, coming-of-age films are cheap to produce compared to other genres, a paramount issue for a national audio-visual industry that at the time was largely dependent on two major public-sector backers, British television and the IFB. Second, most are intended to appeal to both adults and teenagers, and, in fact, some can also be marketed as family films, which increases potential audience size and extends their life span. Third, *Circle of Friends*, an American-British-Irish coming-of-age film set in 1950s Ireland, turned in $20 million in the United States in

[128] Keith Hopper, "Film Fleadh Irish Premieres," *Film West* 26, autumn 1996, https://web.archive.org/web/20010219225822/http://www.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest/26khart.htm.

1995, which made it one of the most successful Irish-themed films ever and attracted the industry's attention to the genre and setting. Furthermore, coming-of-agers easily met the location placement and plot demands from Irish film investors, who have long wanted mainstream cinema to promote heritage tourism representing Ireland "as a 'feel good' location with an Arcadian landscape" inhabited by feisty colleens, charming elders, and lovable children, where romantic fantasies of a feminine, maternal, rural past come true.[129] Accordingly, many 1990s Irish-produced films were expected to suit the colonial representation of Ireland, still very much alive in popular culture on both sides of the Atlantic, to cater to the needs of the tourism industry and counterbalance the negative media image stemming from clerical paedophilia, political corruption, and the Ulster Troubles. However, it should not be overlooked that the latter image was itself also largely built on the colonial representation of Ireland, which over the last centuries and depending on political circumstances has shifted between the anachronistic Edenic paradise mentioned above and a chaotic, violent dystopia populated by irrational, violent apes and suffering, passive women and children.[130]

Constrained by public backers, 1990s mainstream Irish films seldom address contentious issues directly. However, as Martin McLoone argues in the seminal *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema*, these issues lurk beneath the apparent shallowness and bonhomie of these productions, so that they "can be engaged politically" although they are "not politically engaged."[131] In fact, in his opinion, the obsession with coming-of-age narratives and the recurrence of dysfunctional families in 1990s Irish cinema, "with either the mother or the father missing from the drama," would both be related to the string of child abuse cases that shocked Ireland throughout the 1990s.[132]

All in all, Irish coming-of-age narratives from the 1990s offer a more-bitter-than-sweet look at the recent past of the island that goes well beyond child abuse to address the myths, half-truths, and silences that—in the name of the Church, the nation, reunification, and/or economic progress—

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[129] Ruth Barton, "The Ballykissangelization of Ireland," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 20, no. 3 (2000): 420.
[130] See, e.g., L. Perry Curtis Jr., *Apes and Angels. The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Press, 1997).
[131] McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 168.
[132] McLoone, *Irish Film*, 168.

shrouded widespread political and clerical failure, corruption, and abuse and, for decades, kept the Irish people in a state of infancy. Against De Valera's Ireland obsession with presenting the traditional Catholic family as bliss, in these narratives, parents are dead, absent, or deeply troubled by the burden of an unspoken-of, suppressed, unhealed past conflict. At the start of the narrative, the family, however, is living in denial, and the teen protagonist has suppressed trauma by taking refuge in an imaginary, infantile world mostly built on American pop culture, especially westerns such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Hill, 1969). In turn, the dramatic conflict arises when an external force shatters the facade of stability and puts the reluctant teen hero on the path to adulthood. This force is usually a stranger to the local community and quite often also a member of the other sex. When the latter occurs, the protagonist usually falls for and is forbidden from seeing them because the romance is considered a threat to the (false) stability of the community, as it challenges the national, sectarian, social, and/or class boundaries (Irish/foreign, Protestant/Catholic, anti-Treaty/pro-Treaty, farmer/tenant) left by past conflicts and is feared to lead to further strife and tragedy. Rather than submitting passively to their elders' boundaries, the teen protagonist usually shows a staunch determination to question them and build an alternative, more progressive and open, sense of Irish identity. While 1990s Irish coming-of-agers set in or intended to be about Northern Ireland tend to end on a pessimistic note, most of those set in the Republic celebrate the willingness of Celtic Tiger Ireland to shed light on dark chapters of both its colonial and nationalist past by closing the hero's journey in a cathartic confrontation with traumatic memories that reveals truth, restores order, and brings about growth for both teenagers and adults.

Although it is tempting to argue, as we did in 2015, that this "confrontation with a divisive past" sets Irish coming-of-age narratives apart from their US counterparts, we should perhaps have added that these narratives actually share much in common with the immensely popular Hollywood father/son narratives of the 1980s.[133] According to Susan Jeffords, into this category would fall sagas such as *Rambo, Star Wars, Indiana Jones*, and especially *Back to the Future*.[134] Reflecting the 1950s nostalgia of Reagan's America and its anxiety about the future of the president's neo-conservative

[133] Menéndez-Otero, "Cowboys," 31.
[134] Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 64–90.

revolution after he left office, *Back to the Future*, for instance, centres on a 1980s teenager who successfully transitions to adulthood and betters his life and that of those around him by physically travelling back and forth in time, thereby ensuring that the young selves of his father, his mother, his future son, and his great-grandfather make no life-ruining decisions.[135]

In Irish coming-of-age films, one of the main concerns is how to prevent history from repeating itself so that the community can start moving forward, either towards the audience's present (if the film is set in the past) or to an unspecified, better future (if it is set in the present). These films address this concern by either presenting an Ireland of the past, one where it is possible to resolve certain conflicts and with glimpses of the tolerance and modernity of Celtic Tiger Ireland, or an Ireland of the present in which the traumatic, unspoken-of past can be finally dug up and dealt with in a constructive way. By contrast, in *Back to the Future*, the main issue at stake is how to prevent certain past (and future) events from ever happening without also altering the community's present for the worse in the process, as occurs in *Back to the Future: Part II* (Zemeckis, 1989). In other words, while texts about the past and/or future reimagine them through the often-nostalgic lens of their target audience's present, in the storyworld of *Back to the Future*, both the past and future can also be experienced first-hand and, more importantly, actively reshaped by the teen hero to yield an enhanced version of the diegetic present.

*Back to the Future* is set between 1985 and 1955, that is, between the year of its release and thirty years prior. *Sing Street* is also set three decades into the past, in a fictional 1985 Dublin where *Back to the Future* has been released earlier than it was in reality (December 4), and its 1950s nostalgia can be talked about right after the mid-term exams (late October) and then appropriated to yield an enhanced version of the diegetic present. The "Enchantment Under the Sea" dance sequence from *Back to the Future* inspires Conor to turn the rather dismal, sparsely attended rehearsal for the music video of "Drive It Like You Stole It" at the school gym into a glossy, well-attended, well-choreographed, wish-fulfilling musical number at a cinematic 1950s American prom also containing elements of Hollywood teen classics like *Rebel without a Cause* and *Grease* (Kleiser, 1978). For all

[135] Michael D. Dwyer, *Back to the Fifties: Nostalgia, Hollywood Film, and Popular Music of the Seventies and Eighties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 18–44; Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 64–90.

his claims about being a no-nostalgia futurist, then, Conor ends up looking backwards. His nostalgic yearnings, though, fit into what Tom Vanderbilt calls "displaced nostalgia," as they are about the American 1950s, a time and place he has never experienced personally, making us wonder whether his alleged futurism is actually no more than a tongue-in-cheek allusion to his being a fan of the Marty McFly story.[136] Be that as it may, like many other cinematic Irish teen protagonists before him, what Conor never expresses nostalgia for is the Ireland of the past, to whose legacy of oppression American and, significantly, British pop culture act as antidotes.

We say *significantly* because while American comics, films, television, and music have often been acknowledged as a spiritual counterbalance to and a source of hope and joy in the suffocating Catholic nationalist small-mindedness and economic deprivation of post-independence Ireland, their British counterparts have not. The country's status as former coloniser of Ireland, the Troubles, and continuing national anxieties about the (un)solidness of the cultural *difference* on which political independence had been based prevented for decades. In *Sing Street*, however, with the exceptions of *Back to the Future*, Hall & Oates, and A-Ha, it is British bands and their music videos on the BBC One music chart show *Top of the Pops* that not only allow Conor to escape his depressing everyday but also to start forming the artistic and personal identity through which he eventually grows out of his infancy and Ireland itself. In line with this, it is hardly surprising that his—and Raphina's—dreamland of freedom and opportunities is not the East Coast of the United States, the standard destination of the cinematic Irish migrant, but the very heart of the British Empire, London.

While *Sing Street* is realistic when it portrays the journey to London as the first major step towards international stardom for Irish artists, we find it very strange that none of the pop-rock Irish bands and singers who made it big in the period 1975–85 is even mentioned. Surely Brendan and Conor would at least have talked about Thin Lizzy, The Boomtown Rats, Rory Gallagher, Horslips, and especially U2 in real life and found as much inspiration in their success stories as in the videos they shot in Dublin and elsewhere, if only because they were also regularly featured on *Top of the*

[136] Tom Vanderbilt, "The Nostalgia Gap," *Baffler* 5 (1993): 152–57, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43555664.

*Pops.*[137] Surely, too, someone would have realised at some point that *Cosmo*, the stage name Raphina comes up with for Conor, is as phonetically close to *Conor* as it is to *Bono.*

This absence is even stranger given that, when asked to select the music videos that heavily influenced him as a "fledgling filmmaker," Carney chose Phil Lynott's "Old Town" (Gregg, Heffernan, and Murphy, 1982), Duran Duran's "Rio" (Mulcahy, 1983), Michael Jackson's "Thriller" (Landis, 1983), Frankie Goes to Hollywood's "Two Tribes" (Godley and Creme, 1984), and The Cure's "Close to Me" (Pope, 1985).[138] *Sing Street* establishes a three-layered intertextual relation with "Rio": Significant parts of the video are quoted in the narrative as the family watches it on the BBC (8:00–9:39); the song is then covered by Conor's band (20:49–21:49), and, finally, both are used to create Sing Street's first video and song, the pastiche entitled "The Riddle of the Model" (23:25–25:30, 26:50–32:26). In addition, when they are about to start shooting the video, "Thriller" is referenced in the dialogue as one of the sources of inspiration for the action (29:36). Although "Close to Me" does not appear in *Sing Street*, another song by The Cure, "In Between Days," ushers in Conor's Cure-head, happy-sad phase and provides intertextual inspiration for "A Beautiful Sea" (50:27–51:40). Despite Frankie Goes to Hollywood being one of Carney's favourite bands from the 1980s, neither the band nor "Two Tribes" is ever brought up. Neither is Phil Lynott or "Old Town," even though for Carney the latter "was one of those videos that gave me permission to be a pop star in my head, to go off and form a band […] Every time it came on TV, I was mesmerised,"[139] while the alleged necessity of having an African-Irish boy in the band could easily have been justified based on Lynott being mixed race and the fact that his Dublin statue and a Thin Lizzy tribute band both feature in *Once*.

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[137] Carney has said that he deliberately left U2 out of the film because "they were New Romantics for a while [and] then they became a Christian rock band," and that their towering influence prevented Ireland from having any New Romantic bands (Power, "Music-driven comedy"). However, not all the music in *Sing Street* belongs to that style and, besides, there was at least one popular Irish New Romantic band in the late 1970s and early 1980s: Tokyo Olympics (formerly DC Nien). Funnily enough, after publishing their only album, *Radio*, with Polydor in 1982, they moved to London because, according to guitarist Paul McGuinness, they felt that they would "just bask in mediocrity" if they "stay[ed] in Ireland" (quoted in Brian McMahon, "Brand New Retro—Tokyo Olympics," *Totally Dublin*, July 2021, https://www.totallydublin.ie/more/brand-new-retro-tokyo-olympics/).

[138] "With *Sing Street*, John Carney Evokes His MTV," interview by Bruce Fretts, *New York Times*, April 7, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/10/movies/with-sing-street-john-carney-evokes-his-mtv.html.

[139] "With *Sing Street*."

The problem is that *Sing Street* aims to convey an Irish adult world where the stiffening legacy of De Valera's Ireland is still felt and leaves little room for hope, happiness, and material progress, which can only really be achieved if one dares to emigrate to London. A success story like U2's would have certainly weakened one of the most important messages of the film, which incidentally Carney reinforces by turning the ferry from Dublin to England into a visual motif—*Sing Street*'s equivalent to *Begin Again*'s headphone splitter—that appears at three of the most important moments in any conventional three-act narrative: the beginning, the end, and the midpoint. While at both the midpoint and the end, we see the ferry because Conor and Raphina meet—and, on the second occasion, almost crash into—it at sea, as occurs with the music videos, the first time both the viewer and Conor see a ferry full of young Irish emigrants is on TV. In fact, we find it highly significant that, barely two minutes into the film, the very first thing we see Conor watching on TV is not a music video but an RTÉ news report about Irish emigration that includes some resource footage of a ferry. In other words, although the narrative takes much longer to start addressing this theme than, for instance, Conor's infatuation with Raphina or the formation of the band, whether the protagonist will be able to leave Ireland is the foundation stone upon which Carney builds the film's dramatic conflict, and there is nothing incongruent in culminating the narrative by answering the opening question affirmatively—in fact, quite the opposite.

Immediately after we first meet Conor trying to simultaneously escape and cope with his parents' off-screen argument by improvising a song on his guitar about the argument itself, we cut to the intertitle "Dublin 1985" and start listening to what seems to be a real contemporary news piece about the "enormous increase" in the number of "young Irish people coming to London in search of work" (1:48–1:54). As the story is completed by highlighting that many Irish emigrants "take the boat with barely enough money to survive a few days in London, but still they emigrate because they see hope across the sea, hope they cannot see in Ireland," the RTÉ reporter Andrew Kelly is revealed as the source of the previously off-screen sound in a grainy piece to camera, before moving on to footage of Irish emigrants at an airport and then to a CU of a television showing the same footage and a resource reel of a ferry leaving for England. Although the piece feels real and does indeed use footage from at least one RTÉ News story broadcast on November 11, 1985, it has been heavily manipulated

to suit the film's message. Rather than encouraging emigration to London, the original thirteen-minute piece, entitled "London Streets Not Paved with Gold," does the opposite: It criticises the social policies of the Irish and British governments and warns prospective emigrants of the high likelihood of ending up on the streets unless they come to Britain with a substantial amount of money.[140]

As in *Once*, in *Sing Street*, daring to go to London is the only way to really mature and try to make one's dreams come true. Like in so many 1990s Irish coming-of-agers—where, incidentally, the symbolic journey to adulthood is also often related to a physical journey of some sort—the alternative to what may seem like a reckless adventure is rather discouraging: an Ireland of absent, unhappy parents, some of whom are dead (Raphina's father) or absent for unknown reasons (Ngig's father), while others have been committed due to mental illness (Raphina's mother) or alcoholism and domestic battery (Eamon's father), others are alcoholics (Conor's and Barry's fathers) and drug addicts (Raphina's late father and, according to Darren, Barry's parents), others are unemployed (Conor's father and, most likely, Barry's), and still others are trapped in unhappy marriages due to the economic crisis and Catholic-orientated marital and sexual legislation (Eamon's and Conor's parents).

Although *Sing Street* never explicitly engages with the debate about female sexuality that polarised Ireland in the mid-1980s and led to the lift of the ban on contraception in 1985 and the renewal of those on abortion and divorce in referenda in 1983 and 1986, respectively, it makes clear that Conor's parents, especially his mother, are victims of the legislation derived from the Catholic-biased Irish Constitution of 1937. As Brendan points out (1:07:22–1:07:30), they were driven into a loveless marriage just to have sex and, although this is not even implied, the lack of contraception must have resulted in her pregnancy, and the impossibility of getting an abortion in 1960s Ireland left them no other option but to have him. Twenty-some unhappy years and another two children later, it is not just that they cannot legally divorce; the dismal state of the Irish economy in 1985 makes it unaffordable for them to even separate until they sell the family home and settle their outstanding shared mortgage.[141]

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[140] Andrew Kelly, "London Streets Not Paved with Gold," *RTÉ News*, November 12, 1985, video, 13:11, https://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/1030-emigration-once-again/319381-irish-emigrants-in-london/.
[141] On the Irish economy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, see further, e.g., J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 500–521; Patrick T. Geary, "Ireland's

Faced with this depressing reality, it would not have been weird if Penny and Eamon's Mum were also dead, had gone insane, or had become raving alcoholics. However, Carney implies that life is still bearable for Penny thanks to her extra-marital affair with her boss and the few minutes she spares every evening to read the paper, smoke a cigarette, and have a glass of wine while soaking in the sun. Added to the fact that she has a job outside the home and is never portrayed doing domestic chores, this puts her at odds with the ideal of mother and wife on which Catholic nationalism shaped Irish female identity for decades. It also evokes a sense that despite the conservative backlash at the time, women's liberation was quietly taking off in 1985 Ireland—a fact also evident at Eamon's and even suggested at Synge Street CBS. At the former, Eamon's apparently submissive, stay-at-home mother (Marcella Plunkett) has had enough of her alcoholic, abusive, probably ne'er-do-well husband and makes up for the lack of marital sex with a dildo (21:40). Miss Dunne (Lydia McGuinness), the only female teacher at the latter, is also the only faculty member who remains supportive of Conor throughout the narrative: She first praises his drawings and his being in a band in her arts class (40:51); she then implicitly makes it possible for Conor to shoot a music video at the school gym by agreeing to work on a Saturday (1:08:58–1:13:30); finally, she can be seen watching and enjoying Conor's controversial gig (e.g., 1:33:13).

Brother Baxter, the only important adult character in the film who is not a parent, also fails to be a role model for Conor and his friends. Despotic, mean, uncompassionate, and more interested in ensuring compliance with traditional masculinity and the school dress code than in providing a valuable education to the boys of whom he is in charge, he is a symbol of how the Church, and particularly the Christian Brothers, used its monopoly over education in post-independence Ireland to instil fear in the masses and spread an oppressive killjoy mentality. Mainly aimed at suppressing all traces of dissent and perpetuating a social hierarchy that placed the Church at the top and made it accountable to no one, this kind of education would be largely responsible for the unhappiness and frustration of all the film's adults, including Brother Baxter himself. Thus, although *Sing Street* never dives into the muddy waters of clerical sex abuse, both the script and Wycherley's acting suggest—

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Economy in the 1980s: Stagnation and Recovery. A Preliminary Review of the Evidence," *The Economic and Social Review* 23, no. 3 (1992): 254–59, 267–70, 277–79, http://www.tara.tcd.ie/bitstream/handle/2262/64616/23%20apr%2092%20geary.pdf.

especially in the sequence where he calls Conor to his office and ends up forcibly removing his glam-like makeup in a toilet (41:27–43:35)—that behind the character's sourness and rule-abiding obsession may lurk insecurities about his own masculinity and even some forbidden gay/paedophilic desires towards Conor.

Although Carney's script originally established a clearer parallelism between aggressiveness and sexual repression by also making Barry a budding closeted gay (which, nevertheless, is still subtly implied when he asks Conor to "dance with [his] pants down" because he has heard that Conor is "a queer" [6:52–7:40]), in the final version of the film, no other character, adult or teen, shows the slightest hint of homosexuality. Still, *Sing Street* suggests that being or just being considered to be homosexual was a constant source of anxiety for 1980s Irish male teens, and that any perceived deviation from the repressive Catholic male identity could lead to such taboo consideration and, therefore, to being socially ostracised as an Other. In this oppressive Ireland, wearing makeup or being in a band qualifies to many as deviations from being a man. Consequently, the slur *faggot* is directed at them at least four times (19:52, 1:24:20, 1:24:28, 1:25:59); *queer* is also used as an insult (6:52–7:40, 56:20); Eamon is asked whether his father is in a "gay band" given the costumes they wear (27:43); Darren and Garry are reluctant to put on makeup for the first music video; Brendan says that without Raphina, they are "just a bunch of gay-looking kids" (35:16), and when Conor and Darren show up at Barry's to ask him to be the band's roadie, he asks "what would you want with me in a fag band?" (1:22:46). This anxiety is also visually signalled by the scribbled penises on the "futurist band forming" notice Garry and Larry pick up at school (19:44), and the "queers go home" graffiti on one of the walls in the alleyway where they shoot the video for "The Riddle of the Model" (first seen at 26:57).

By contrast, although *golliwog* is used once to refer to Ngig, although one of the reasons for recruiting him for the band is based on the racist stereotype of the musically talented Negro, and although he is initially believed to have a limited command of English, non-whiteness seems to be much easier to assimilate into Irish masculinity than homosexuality. Accordingly, while this cinematic Ireland may be deeply flawed, it is not the racist island of *The Nephew* (Brady, 1998). If the white Irish-American protagonists of *Top o'the Morning* (Miller, 1949) and *The Quiet Man* stop being

foreigners as soon as they prove their knowledge of traditional Irish music, Ngig's non-whiteness stops being an issue the moment he begins to speak in Hiberno-English (19:23). From that moment onwards, Ngig's race is never brought up again, surprisingly not even when he himself defiantly signals his Otherness by putting on whiteface makeup for the video of "A Beautiful Sea" (50:08–52:30).

Although we can argue that the boys' initial attitude towards Ngig comically reflects the curiosity and ignorance, rather than racism, with which the first significant groups of non-white immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers were met in Ireland in the late 1990s, the picture changes dramatically when *Sing Street* is read as a story-of-origins of the target audience's present and a reflection on how much—or how little—everything has changed since the year in which it is set.[142] *Sing Street* affectionately finds in the discreet determination of common people like Penny, Eamon's Mum, Conor, and Raphina the origin of the chain of events that made it impossible that contemporary Irishmen and Irishwomen have to go through many of the things the characters go through. While the ban on abortion was yet to be repealed when *Sing Street* was released (it would be two years later), people in Ireland had been able to legally use contraception since 1985, get a divorce since 2006, and get an abortion when doctors considered that a pregnant woman's life was at risk since 2013. Moreover, while the Church still has a monopoly on Irish education,[143] the massive public outrage at the clerical abuse and paedophilia scandal that has come to light since the early 1990s makes it quite unlikely that someone like Brother Baxter could hold the position of principal at an Irish school in 2016. Likewise, although *faggot* could still be used as a term of abuse in 2016, homosexuality was no longer considered a threat to Irishness, as shown by the large majority that voted for the legalisation of same-sex marriages in the 2015 referendum and the fact that the then Minister for Health, Leo Varadkar, came out as gay in the same year and went on to become Taoiseach in 2017. We wish we could end this brief account of Ireland's enormous progress towards a modern liberal mindset by

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[142] The change can also be illustrated by the stark contrast between the relatively innocent racial joke in *Sing Street* and those in *The Guard* (McDonagh, 2011) and *Between the Canals* (O'Connor, 2011), which use humour to show that in 2010s Ireland, the stereotype of Black masculinity principally revolved around drug trafficking and primitive, animal sexuality. See further Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 187, 209–211.

[143] See Daniel Faas, Aimee Smith, and Merike Darmody, "Between ethos and practice: are Ireland's new multi-denominational primary schools equal and inclusive?," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 49, no. 4 (2019): 602, 606–607, https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2018.1441704.

saying that Varadkar, who is also of mixed race, is another symbol of how significantly things have improved for ethnic minorities and non-nationals over the last thirty years. However, the opposite is largely the case and, for instance, the fact that an immigrant African mother and her son are living in social housing in the Liberties in central Dublin, about which no one seems to care in the film, may have been a major issue in the story had *Sing Street* been set in the 2000s or 2010s.

While racism is not prevalent in twenty-first century Ireland, racial prejudice and xenophobia have grown in parallel with the number of non-nationals—especially non-white—residing in the country. The Ireland of *Sing Street* is different from that of *Once*: It is a country from which people massively emigrate and, therefore, what the boys say about Ngig being "probably the one Black guy in the whole school" and "probably in Dublin" (18:30) rings quite true. By 2006, however, 107,000 people were arriving annually in Ireland and only 36,000 were leaving, and 420,000 non-nationals were already living in the country—almost twice as many as only four years prior.[144] This was, however, an era of unprecedented economic prosperity, and the local labour market was not only able to create jobs—most of them unskilled and poorly paid—for the newcomers, it was also able to absorb the many Irish women who joined the workforce and the thousands of returned Irish migrants who settled in Ireland between 1995 and 2007.[145] In spite of this, the coincidence in time of Ireland's prosperity and the exponential rise in the number of applications for asylum, the fact that neither asylum seekers nor refugees could work legally until their cases were settled, the deterioration of the welfare state during the period, the longstanding prejudice towards travellers, and the 9/11 terror attacks soon coalesced to create a rather unwelcoming atmosphere towards humanitarian immigrants. Fake and exaggerated accounts of arrivals and uncivil behaviour of this kind of immigrants by a sensationalist media contributed to spreading feelings of resentment and fears that an uncontrollable tide of public-benefit scroungers, especially Black African pregnant women, could overwhelm Ireland, make it less safe, and cause its welfare and health services to collapse.[146]

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[144] Carlos Menéndez-Otero, "De emigrantes a inmigrantes y viceversa: La República de Irlanda a comienzos del siglo XXI," *Ecléctica* 2 (2013): 79, https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/4326238.pdf.
[145] Menéndez-Otero, "De emigrantes," 79.
[146] Menéndez-Otero, "De emigrantes," 80.

With the expansion of the European Union towards Central and Eastern Europe in 2004, these fears were somewhat extended to migrants from the accession countries, although in this case, they had much more to do with potential drops in salaries and shortages of jobs, especially for unskilled Irish workers, than with the welfare state. As a result of these fears, in a referendum held in 2004, almost 80% of voters said "yes" to making the right to Irish citizenship to all babies born in Ireland and their mothers dependent on whether at least one parent was already an Irish citizen or was legally entitled to such right for having resided at least three of the previous four years in Ireland, being from Northern Ireland, or being of Irish ancestry.[147] Needless to say, the economic crisis of the late 2000s to mid-2010s significantly worsened the public perception of immigration. During the crisis, as many as 72% of Irish people believed that there were too many immigrants in Ireland.[148] Almost as many, if not more, also believed that it was unfair that immigrants had jobs in Ireland while Irish nationals were unemployed and emigrating by the thousands, and that they were also using public services funded by the Irish taxpayer—usage that was resented even more in the case of Black Africans, who were often said to have made no contribution at all to the Irish economy since the 1990s.[149]

*Sing Street* suggests, however, that immigrants ought not to be blamed for the sorry state of public services in mid-2010s Ireland and the emigration of thousands of Irish abroad, as they were both as much of an essential part of the social landscape in 1985, when there were virtually no immigrants in the country. While the civil rights of and attitudes towards women, homosexuals, and immigrants in the storyworld allow the contemporary Irish viewer to infer a sense of social change and progress, the opposite is the case when it comes to emigration, the economy and, to an extent, education. Although when the film came out in Ireland, the local economy was already on its way to recovery, the previous seven years had been as marred by recession as the mid-1980s, with high unemployment, massive spending cuts and layoffs in the public sector, tax rises, bank defaults and bailouts, foreclosures, and mass emigration. As in the 1980s, throughout the crisis, the Irish

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[147] Menéndez-Otero, "De emigrantes," 82–84. See further, e.g., Bryan Fanning, "Racism, rules and rights," in *Immigration and social change in the Republic of Ireland*, ed. Bryan Fanning (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 19–22; Siobhán Mullally, "Children, citizenship and constitutional change," in *Immigration and social change in the Republic of Ireland*, ed. Bryan Fanning (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 27–46.
[148] Menéndez-Otero, "De emigrantes," 88.
[149] Menéndez-Otero, "De emigrantes," 88.

government also kept insisting that the neo-liberal policies deployed by successive executives had nothing to do with anything of the above and using euphemisms to make the contradictory co-existence of costly bank bailouts and draconian austerity measures palatable to the public. All in all, then, *Sing Street* may be set in 1985, but its references to mass emigration, ferries full of Irish people leaving the country, and "half the bloody country [being] out of work" (1:12), Robert's refusal to put the fire on (08:13), and the decision to transfer Conor to a Christian Brothers-run state school (2:11–3:27) certainly felt very much part of the Irish audience's present in 2016. What is more, it should be noted that Conor's transfer is justified using a kind of formal, euphemistic language reminiscent of that used by Irish politicians during the latest financial crisis and announced right after a family meeting where Conor is given as little say in a decision crucial for his future as the Irish population was in the decisions concerning theirs in that period. Thus, at the family meeting, Conor's parents say that they are "under a lot of pressure at the moment. Like the rest of the country" (2:19) and "need to make some cuts in the budget somewhere" (2:49); having realised that they "could make a significant saving if [they] altered the education situation" (2:33–2:36), and with Brendan having already dropped out of college, they have agreed to "transfer" him "from one school to another school" (2:45–2:47).

Given that Conor will be taken out of one Catholic school and put into another, a change that may seem inconsequential to viewers outside—and some younger audiences in—Ireland, Brendan reveals to them (and to Conor) that the kind of education his brother has received so far (at a Jesuit school, as we learn later) and the one he will be provided at his new school have nothing to do with each other (3:05–3:13, 3:24). Whereas the former was, and still is, synonymous with good-quality, costly private education, by the early 1980s, it was already vox populi that the Christian Brothers did not have a "fine history of education" (3:00), as Robert claims, but a shameful trajectory of poor educational standards and physical and sexual abuse, as Brendan maliciously insinuates and Conor later experiences first-hand. Even though the film says nothing about it, such a trajectory was possible because successive Irish governments not only tolerated the abuses of the Brothers for decades but also actively contributed to covering them up, as shown by the fact that one of the first attempts at

exposing them, the TV movie *Our Boys* (Black, 1982), remained banned in Ireland until 1991.[150] A string of public revelations of abuse and payments of millions of euros in reparations to victims have since followed. Consequently, in 2008, the Brothers decided to put an end to their presence in Irish education and transferred their schools to a charitable trust. By the time *Sing Street* came out, then, despite Irish education still being more or less controlled by the Church and essentially paid for by the State, with its endemic underfunding only made worse by austerity, at least the kind of unaccountable, tyrannical clerical authority and education embodied by Brother Baxter was as much a thing of the past as the ban on divorce—a change, the film seems to tell us, that would never have been possible if people like Conor had not kickstarted it in the 1980s with shenanigans like his closing number at the school disco, where he openly challenges Brother Baxter's authority by throwing DIY masks of the principal's face from the stage for the crowd to put on while he performs the incendiary "Brown Shoes" (1:31:35–1:34:30).

Conor's attempt to change things in Ireland stops there, though, as the narrative ends with him and Raphina doing what he saw many compatriots do on TV at the beginning of the film and then in front of him while sailing to Dalkey Island at its midpoint: setting off for England. Unlike Brother Baxter, the 233,000 Irishmen and women who left Ireland between 2009 and 2014, the 42,500 who did so in 2015, and the 37,100 who moved abroad the following year bear out that emigration was as much an integral part of Ireland's everyday when *Sing Street* opened as it was in 1985.[151] Nevertheless, rather than a tragedy or an unwanted legacy of the Irish past, emigration is portrayed at worst as a fact of life and at best as the last, and probably the most important, rite of passage through which one has to go on the journey to adulthood in Ireland. Whereas all the adults in the film can be said to illustrate, to some extent, the consequences of not leaving Ireland at the right time, no character illustrates them better than Conor's elder brother, Brendan.

Like *Into the West* or *Moondance*, *Sing Street* is a story of brotherly love and how elder brothers can help and guide younger ones in their transition to adulthood. However, unlike what often

[150] For a detailed discussion on Cathal Black's TV movie, see McLoone, *Irish Film*, 138–41.
[151] Simon Carswell, "More Irish emigrants leaving the country than returning again," *Irish Times*, August 27, 2019, https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/abroad/more-irish-emigrants-leaving-the-country-than-returning-again-1.3998770.

occurs in Irish coming-of-age films, it is the elder brother rather than the parents who has yet to come to terms with a traumatic past at the start of the narrative. Moreover, whereas in Irish coming-of-agers American popular culture suffices to build an imaginary, infantile world where trauma can be temporarily suppressed, Brendan's incomplete coming-of-age has left him trapped, physically and symbolically, in a liminal space between childhood and adulthood. If he were still just a child, the records in his room, the music videos on *Top of the Pops*, and not ever leaving the family home would have been enough to suppress his feelings of regret and disillusionment for not going to Germany to pursue a career in music when he was in his teens. However, he is no longer a child, so like other adults in the film, he also tries to cope with his depressing reality and hide his sourness by using substances (hash) and maintaining a facade of cynicism and sarcasm. As a Carney character, then, Brendan is a blend of the Guy and Dan who, like either of the male leads of his previous musicals, is stuck in a traumatic past and needs to re-connect with life.

Although in *Sing Street* a woman is again portrayed as the source of artistic inspiration for a musician, and Brendan shares many traits with both the Guy and Dan, Raphina is neither Brendan's Girl nor his Gretta; Conor is. It is by taking on the role of musical and love mentor to his younger brother that Brendan begins to find his way again and remember that he was once an able musician and athlete and a success with girls. By the middle of the narrative, he is already trying to give up hash and "do something with [his] life" (1:06:45). At the end, we first learn that he has been writing a song for Conor while he was playing at the school disco (1:34:43); we then see him leaving the family home (1:36:36), probably for the first time in years, to take his brother and Raphina in the old family's Mercedes to Coliemore Harbour in Dalkey, where they plan to sail to England on their grandfather's old boat, the Jim, obviously named after Carney's late eldest brother.

While the concert *almost* completes Conor's journey towards artistic and personal maturity, through the character of Brendan, the film has been telling us all along that the journey will not be complete until Conor dares to go to London and, what is more, unless he does it before it is too late. This message, which "Go Now"—the Levine-Carney tune that plays over Conor and Raphina's final scenes and part of the end credits as a sort of flashforward illustrating the kind of song that Conor ended up crafting out of Brendan's lyrics—explicitly sums up, makes the final separation between

Brendan and Conor far more narratively necessary than those between the protagonist couples of *Once* and *Begin Again.* However, as occurs in these films, the character who is left behind does not finish the story completely empty-handed, either. By ensuring that Conor successfully completes his journey to adulthood, Brendan himself arrives at a belated, modest coming-of-age. The drive to Dalkey may look unimportant when compared to Conor's journey to England, but it surely represents a giant leap forward for Brendan, as with it comes to an end the lockdown he imposed upon himself following his botched attempt at emigration and what seems to have been a brief stint at college. In other words, although Conor's successful transition to adulthood does not bring about a full restoration of family order at the end of the narrative, as is often the case in 1990s Irish coming-of-agers, it at least allows his elder brother to come to terms with his long ignored traumatic past and at last start moving on with his life.

## A Film Musical by John Carney: The Narrative and Mise-en-scène of *Sing Street*

If the opening of *Begin Again* sets the tone for the movie as a powered-up version of *Once*, that of *Sing Street* indicates that it aims to be a second, hopefully more successful attempt at keeping the indie spirit essence of *Once* with a medium budget. Again, we open with a musician singing his sorrows on a guitar, although this time we do not catch them performing one of their songs in a public place but trying to both escape and cope with an unpleasant experience by turning it into a song in the intimacy of his bedroom—something we have seen the Guy, Violet, and Gretta doing before, albeit later in their respective narratives. As in *Once*, the light is natural, the camera is handheld, and the musician, although much younger than the Guy, is not played by a film star.

We cut next to an intertitle that anchors the scene—and the rest of the story—in a specific place and time, "Dublin 1985," that is, in the city where *Once* is set, yet thirty years into the past. Over the intertitle, we start to hear the narration of "London Streets Not Paved with Gold," the RTÉ news story on mass emigration to which the visuals move next, and which Carney uses to introduce the key dramatic question of the narrative, add an extra layer of documentary realism to the film's recreation of 1985 Dublin, and evoke the flashbacks of *Once* and *Begin Again*. In both those films,

(seemingly real) amateur, low-res video footage displayed on a PED screen is often used to signal the beginning of a flashback and, therefore, establish different time levels within the storyworld. While not strictly linked to a flashback, the low-res RTÉ footage and the CRT TV on which we (and Conor) see it also serve to underline that the story that has just opened is going to unfold in the past, even though, on this occasion, such a past will not be the characters' but the audience's.

From here, we move on to the kitchen scene where we first meet the rest of the members of the Lawlor household and learn that the family's distressing economic situation parallels that of Ireland and makes Conor's Jesuit private school no longer affordable. Whereas in *Begin Again* the non-diegetic pounding rock beat of "Drowning Pool" and its cynical lyrics help the visuals transition smoothly from the club to Dan's apartment, first, and then to his moving car, in *Sing Street* we go from Conor's home to the schoolyard and onto a classroom to the piercing heavy metal of Motörhead's "Stay Clean," an internal diegetic sound that underscores Conor's anxiety at his new school, and rightly so. As Conor approaches the school, the camera alternates between following him in a tracking shot and glimpses of the main building and the other students in the schoolyard through his eyes. These POV shots show, sometimes in slow-motion, students looking threateningly or mockingly at him as he passes by, smoking, spitting tobacco juice, and fighting. We can also see that one student almost hits him with his bicycle; another throws a dead rat at him. Moreover, although Conor does not talk to anyone, his antagonists and allies are introduced in the scene. His soon-to-be bully, Barry, menacingly looks him up and down at the gate; Eamon and Darren can be spotted walking amicably together among the other students, and Brother Baxter is presented as a sinister, Big Brother, warden- or even vampire-like figure, disdainfully watching over the yard from his first-floor perch (figure 13).


**Figure 13**. *Sing Street*: Brother Baxter's first on-screen appearance. © 2016 Cosmo Films, Distressed Films, FilmNation Entertainment, FilmWave, Likely Story, PalmStar Media.

Conor may not be inside the school yet, but he and we already know that it is depressing, dangerous, and closer to those from films like *Blackboard Jungle*, *The Principal* (Cain, 1987), and *Dangerous Minds* (Smith, 1995) than the rosy picture Robert has just painted. The lyrics of "Stay Clean," which the Motörhead frontman has said are about "stay[ing] clean and listen[ing] to your parents" (although it is actually more about trusting yourself, not being scared, and putting up with whatever comes your way), act here as a window into Conor's inner thoughts as he walks through the schoolyard.[152] Although Conor "know[s] the law" (i.e., "act manly"), the appalling reality he is seeing, which he "can't believe," makes it very difficult for him to "agree with" or "obey" his father, who has clearly told him a pack of "filthy white lies." In spite of this, at the end of the first verse, he repeats himself to "stay clean" four times so as to calm down and keep advancing towards the school. It somehow works, so the second verse moves on from Conor's anger, disbelief, and fear to a strategy for survival against all odds ("Grab a hold, don't let go / Don't let them rob you of the only way you know / Oh no, no-one else / Got the right to make you sorry for yourself"), followed by another self-reminder to "stay clean."

As the song reaches its instrumental bridge, we cut to the interior of the school to see Conor's first class, which confirms the grim expectations just set: Conor is the only student who does not have a desk mate; the teacher is a deaf, alcoholic, old Brother who does not even know the course he is teaching, and Conor's classmates go on behaving (talking, hanging about the room, paper-ball

[152] Kory Grow, "Motörhead's Lemmy: My Life in 15 Snarls," *Rolling Stone*, August 28, 2015, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/motorheads-lemmy-my-life-in-15-snarls-64130/.

fighting, smoking, and face-farting) as if no teacher was there, until Brother Baxter unexpectedly enters the room and we cut to the title card (4:34–4:57).

The scene may be as appalling as the previous one, and we may still be at the school, but this is a different location, as is the viewpoint from which we see it: that of a third-person narrator that takes over the narrative and shows us the school, not Conor. The scene kicks off with a slightly low-angle CU of Brother Barnabas (Des Keogh) from the board, with the students blurred in the background (4:34), which cannot possibly reflect the POV of any of the boys. Next, cut to a CU of Conor in his desk looking to his left (4:36). Any associations between his eyeline and the following shot are initially hindered by cutting first to the students to his right and behind him while keeping him tightly framed in the foreground and then panning to the left until the camera finally picks up the students at whom he was staring (4:40). The same can be said about the face-fart prank that follows, which is taken from behind Conor and from a place he was not looking at before the cut, nor is he looking towards it when the camera returns to him to briefly frame him from the angle that will be used to convey Brother Baxter's POV when he appears at the door. Before that occurs, we close off this segment by returning to the opening CU of Brother Barnabas to see him drinking from a hipflask and then cutting to an MS of a student smoking at the back of the room from an angle that does not match Conor's eyeline either.

The setup, location, and POV may be different, but we are still at the school with Conor, and what the scene basically does is expand on the previous one. This is also underscored by the music track: While "Stay Clean" plays through the two scenes and gives the narrative a sense of continuity, the moment we enter the school building, it switches from vocal to instrumental, closing the window into Conor's stream of consciousness that the lyrics had kept open in the schoolyard.

In a similar vein to *Begin Again*, the opening scene is revisited during the narrative and is appropriately modified on every occasion to show how music progressively empowers Conor and his bandmates and to underline the development of his character arc. When we first return to the schoolyard (9:40), the camera again tracks Conor as he walks through the access road, and an internal diegetic song plays over the action and gives us access to Conor's state of mind. Duran Duran's "Rio," which started playing in the previous scene as external diegetic sound coming out of an

electronic device (the Lawlors' living-room TV, a sort of modern *seanchaí* around which the family ritually gathers Thursday to watch the escapist stories told by the music videos on *Top of the Pops*), continues on the soundtrack while Conor advances through the schoolyard, as if it were an earworm playing on loop in his mind. Again, some students glare at him as he walks through, but this time the camera does something similar to what it does in the *Once* scene where the Girl walks alone in the city at night while listening to music on her headphones: It stays on him and conveys that music has already begun to empower Conor and make his surroundings less scary. In fact, for a brief moment, it almost seems as if Brendan's rhetorical question from the previous evening ("What tyranny could stand up to that?") were about to be answered positively. However, Brother Baxter's tyranny is still much too powerful for Conor: Just as when he showed up in the classroom before, the music fades out the moment that the boy runs into him in the schoolyard and starts scolding him for not wearing the mandatory black shoes (9:45).

We return to Conor approaching the school for the third, fourth, and fifth times at intervals of approximately eight minutes of screen time (40:37, 48:28, and 56:04, respectively). The third time, we do so right after seeing the montage that sums up the creation of "Up," the second song by Conor's band, and the emotional effect the finished tune has on Raphina. Like the last time, the camera does not cut to the other students in the schoolyard, and a song plays over the action until Brother Baxter comes on screen. However, the song-writing process has boosted Conor's self-confidence, so this time it is his own music that acts as a sound bridge between the previous scene and this, where we see him walking decisively towards the school wearing makeup and a coloured fringe and ignoring the bemused glances and derogatory Bowie comparisons that his look prompts as he passes by. In a way, it is as if Conor were somewhere else and, therefore, experiencing first-hand the physical and spiritual elevation the song evokes. Although once again the appearance of Brother Baxter makes the music fade out, this time Conor fails to notice his threatening presence on the first floor, and it is the third-person narrator that has to reveal it by stopping tracking Conor and tilting upward at the end of the scene. Nevertheless, Conor's triumph proves to be short-lived, as the clergyman calls the boy to his office only a few seconds of screen time later and forcibly takes off his makeup.

The fourth time, the lengthy instrumental introduction to “In Between Days” by The Cure provides musical accompaniment to the scene while also acting as a sound bridge that connects it to both the preceding and succeeding scenes. Once again, the song first plays as external diegetic sound coming from a device the evening before—the turntable speakers in Brendan’s room—and then, as we cut to the schoolyard and begin to track Conor on his way to school, it changes into something different. Once again, Conor’s look causes bemused glances, and the camera conveys that Conor ignores them by not cutting to the other students.

A few things are different, though. The song goes through a diegetic switch and moves to the non-diegetic music track. Leaving aside the fact that Conor is dressed up as a Cure-head, this is the first occasion on which we see him walking to school with his bandmates. In other words, by this point in the narrative, music has not only empowered Conor but also acted as a community builder, bringing together a bunch of kids who were social outcasts at the beginning. Although the action could have been covered in a single shot, Carney splits it into four to highlight Darren and Eamon’s reservations about Conor’s newfound enthusiasm for happy-sad music (48:46 and 49:04, respectively) and the flamboyant, New Romantic reply he gives to each of them. Closely related to this is the fact that, as seen when we first entered Conor’s classroom, the instrumental nature of the excerpt that plays over the action makes it feel like a sort of musical accompaniment without much informational value and facilitates our focus on the dialogue. Perhaps because the music is not in Conor’s head this time, it is not broken off by Brother Baxter either and continues into the following scene, where it reaches the vocals as the visuals show the band on the DART to Dun Laoghaire.

The camera tracks Conor approaching the school for the fifth and last time right after we see him watching mesmerised the Spain-shot video for Spandau Ballet’s “Gold” on TV with Brendan the previous evening—Conor and Brendan’s equivalent of their mother’s evening cigarette, newspaper, and wine in the sun, that is, the substitute of the kind of holiday they, like her, think they will never be able to afford. Once again, external diegetic sound from an electronic device in the preceding scene becomes internal as we cut to the schoolyard. Once again, Conor is dressed up as his pop idols of the week and accompanied by his bandmates on his way to school, and some heads are turned as they pass by. Once again, the music stops when one of Conor’s antagonists enters the scene. Once again,

the song's vocals give us an insight into Conor's thoughts. And, once again, some things are different from previous iterations of the scene.

This time, it is not just Conor who is dressed up: Except for Darren, the whole band looks like a DIY version of Spandau Ballet. This time, it is not Brother Baxter but Barry who causes the music to fade out. This time, however, Conor is not the naive child he bullied before in the school canteen and toilets: After forming a band, composing three songs, making two music videos, kissing Raphina, and learning about the truly serious, adult nature of the problems of some of the people around him, he is already well on the way to artistic and personal maturity. Indeed, it is difficult to know whether the chorus of "Gold" that accompanies the transition from one scene to the other ("Always believe in your soul / You've got the power to know / You're indestructible / Always believe in // 'Cause you are gold / I'm glad that you're bound to return / Something I could have learned / You're indestructible / Always believe in") is really a summary of Conor's mood, what gives him the final push to confront Barry, or, more likely, a bit of both.

Be that as it may, what matters is that music has given Conor not only the courage to stand up to Barry but also the weapons to turn the skinhead's homophobic insults and threats of physical violence against him and prevail in a fight that, like that in *The Quiet Man*, is fought in front of the community, but where no punches are ever delivered. Instead, Conor beats Barry with just two verbal blows. First, rather than showing himself offended by the slur *queer* that Barry directs at the band as they pass by, Conor retorts to the jeer by ironically comparing him to the Irish writer Oscar Wilde, queer icon and one of the inspirations for the New Romantic movement, which has the effect of redirecting the insult back at Barry and brings out his ignorance in front of everyone. Second, rather than being intimidated by Barry's threats to "kill [him] one of these days," Conor disarms them by showing that the source of the bully's power over him did not lie in his physical superiority but in his own fear of him. Even though Conor's journey is not yet complete, he is safe in the knowledge that there is an alternative, ideal musical reality—one that is unreachable for Barry—to which he can always escape, no matter how difficult the "real" reality becomes, and this has empowered him

enough to make him feel "indestructible," to overcome his fear, and to turn the tables on the bully at last.[153]

By 57:10, then, our hero has already managed to defeat the first of his two antagonists—who, incidentally, will soon turn into an ally and join his music-based community of misfits—and made a severe dent on the tyranny of Old Ireland. However, to fully triumph over it, to truly become an adult and an artist, and to get the girl, he still has to go through two more tests: defeat the symbolic dragon that Brother Baxter incarnates and take the leap of faith of emigrating. How? By really daring to "think big," unleash the full power of his imagination to flesh out a truly ideal musical reality that may transcend the amateur videos he has been making, tear down the boundaries between fantasy and reality erected during the shooting of the band's first music video, and allow the imaginary to blend with the real and radically transform it. Accordingly, what Feuer says about the numbers in the small-scale, contemporary international art musicals mentioned in chapter 2, especially *Strictly Ballroom*, seems largely applicable to *Sing Street* as well:

> The numbers are not quite diegetic, in the sense that they are motivated by the [protagonists'] profession rather than life itself, and yet there is clearly a level that elevates the singing to a higher, less realistic realm in the way that numbers functioned in Busby Berkeley musicals. [They] invoke the fairy-tale musical tradition of creating a contrast between a real world and a dream world and then in the end dissolving the harsh real world into the musical dream world.[154]

As in *Once* and *Begin Again*, the hero begins the narrative as a fish out of water due to a traumatic change that someone close has brought upon him, one who uses music to try to cope with and/or evade the new situation. Paraphrasing U2, Conor is temporarily "stuck in a moment he can't get out of" and needs to find a way to move forward and reconnect with the community. Again, the incident that incites the hero's rebirth is a chance encounter with a member of the opposite sex in a public place, followed by an offer of an artistic collaboration that is initially met with scepticism by

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[153] This segment contains two major continuity errors. First, although Conor is going through his Cure-head phase when he watches "Gold" and we have seen wearing a V-neck jumper and a Cure-head hairstyle in the preceding scene, which presumably takes place earlier that evening, in the shots showing his reactions to the video, he has the clothes and hairdo from the film's opening. Next, when the visuals move from the showdown with Barry to Conor, Eamon, and Darren finding out about the school disco, the latter two are wearing the clothes and accessories they had in the schoolyard, but Conor is not.

[154] Feuer, "International Art Musical," 59.

the other party. However, on this occasion, it is the musician—or rather the would-be musician—who assumes the role of the stranger coming up to the on-stage artist to make the proposal after what seems to have been an unsuccessful performance. This time, the on-stage artist is an aspiring model, not a musician, and the performance is a posing session on a Dublin stoop with no one taking photos. Raphina initially receives the offer of artistic collaboration with as much scepticism as Gretta receives Dan's, and the Guy the Girl's, because Conor seems to know as little about pop music as Dan and the Girl, and neither does Darren look like a video producer. Like Gretta and the Guy, Raphina ends up agreeing to Conor's offer after a conversation in which he first shows his knowledge of music. In this specific case, he sings a couple of lines of the chorus of A-Ha's 1984–85 hit "Take On Me" and, although we never get to hear what she actually hears, it must be similar to what Dan hears at the club, as it is enough to make her give Conor her phone number and agree to star in his music video.

Although in the course of the narrative, Raphina will prove to be as troubled, yet at the same time as resilient, as the Girl and Gretta, when we first met her, she hardly projects the image of frailty of either of the female leads of Carney's previous musicals. Following a standard film musical convention, she, like them, is constructed as the mirror opposite of the male lead. She may not be a foreigner, but the seemingly experienced, world-weary, strong young woman we see at the start of the narrative has as little to do with the inexperienced, naive, bullied child as the Girl has with the Guy and Gretta with Dan. Once again, it is through music that these two seemingly opposite characters begin to develop a very intimate connection and progressively discover that they had much more in common than they thought at first. In addition, like Dan and the Guy, Conor will find out that, despite her detached attitude, for each of his troubles, she has one of a similar nature but much worse. His father is an unemployed alcoholic; hers was a junkie and—like the Girl's—is dead. His mother is having an affair and does not really pay attention to him; hers is a manic depressive and is in a mental hospital. He has been sent to a rough school, she to an orphanage. He is bullied by Brother Baxter and Barry; she may have been sexually abused by her late father and is beaten by her boyfriend. However, rather than relying on an extensive, *Begin Again*-like flashback to present Raphina's backstory and establish a parallelism with Conor's, Carney returns to the narrative mould of *Once* and, most of the time, allows us to learn about Raphina only when she is with the male protagonist—that is, despite

some occasional glimpses of her in her room at the orphanage, we mostly see her through Conor's eyes.

While in *Once* and *Begin Again* the band formation and first rehearsals sequences come much later in the narrative, in *Sing Street* they follow the first encounter between the stranger and the musician. *Begin Again* shows us that it is producers who are often in charge of this stage of the music-making process and, in its own tongue-in-cheek, innocent way, so does *Sing Street*. Hilariously introduced as a practical, street-wise, articulate child who has all the makings of a salesman (or, for that matter, an A&R man), including a deck of handmade business cards, Darren first does for Conor pretty much what Dan first does for Gretta after they decide to make an album together without the support of the industry: He takes Conor to see people he thinks may be good for the band, introduces him to them, and uses his verbal skills to talk them into joining the project. As a result, as in *Once* and *Begin Again*, in no time at all, the protagonist has a supporting band of quirky yet talented local unknowns who, like the one that Dan forms in *Begin Again*, is explicitly multi-racial.

Once again, the entire world then becomes a stage. They may not become buskers this time, but most of the band's videos, where Darren performs technical functions similar to Dan's in the outdoor recording of Gretta's demo, are shot in the streets of a city. What is more, their first music video is recorded in a run-down alleyway reminiscent of the NYC one where "Coming Up Roses" is recorded, and where the unexpected appearance of Barry and his father momentarily threaten to derail the shooting as much as the group of street urchins do in *Begin Again.* Then, just as Dan and Gretta do, Conor and his friends move next to an iconic tourist spot and shoot the video for "A Beautiful Sea" at Dun Laoghaire Harbour—a picturesque, highly recognisable place in Dublin that, conversely, was never used in the locally shot videos of U2 and Thin Lizzy.

As seen in *Once* and *Begin Again*, however, recording a song (or, in this case, shooting a music video) in the street is only one part of a much larger creative process that starts with someone writing the lyrics of a song in a notebook while playing a few chords on a guitar in the intimacy of their bedroom and continues with the song being discussed with and bettered by other fellow musicians. The song is then rehearsed, arranged, and recorded and/or played live. Finally, in the course of the performance, the song is often able to transcend time and space, either by moving to the

music track and playing across scenes set at different times and in different places, or by staying on the diegetic track as the visuals cut away to someone listening to it on a portable player in another time and place.

Regardless, *Once*, *Begin Again*, and *Sing Street* are all backstage musicals that address the ups and downs of making music on the outskirts of a contemporary music industry that no longer invests in developing new artists. In line with this, rehearsals often take place at people's houses; music is performed/recorded at non-professional venues, in the street or, at best, a modest studio, and the live performance/recording at the narrative's climax, while undoubtedly a small-scale success, is hardly a guarantee of a future in the industry. In fact, rather than a contract, what really matters in these films is that music allows the protagonist to grow out of trauma, re-connect with life and people, and take risks outside their comfort zone. The narratives of *Once* and *Sing Street* finish as the protagonists leave for London; we do not know whether the demo tape in the former, or the music videos and photobook in the latter, will win them contracts there. Should that come to pass, we also do not know whether they would embrace the industry as Dave does in one of the subplots of *Begin Again*—incidentally, the only part in the whole triptych that offers a glimpse into professional music-making—or whether they would react as Gretta does at the end of that film (and as Carney himself did in real life): that is, realise that this is not what makes them happy and move on.

With the sole exception of *Sing Street*, another thing that music does not guarantee in Carney's musicals is that the protagonist couple may end up together or even physically consummate their relationship. *Once* and *Begin Again* present love triangles—or, rather, quadrangles—that close with one of the protagonist characters returning to their estranged partner and child, and the other (the one who is not a parent) alone, either because when they reunite with their ex they realise that it will not work (Gretta) or the narrative ends before the reunion takes place (the Guy). In *Sing Street*, while the familial and national pasts loom over Raphina and Conor, their own personal histories, much shorter than those of the characters in *Once* and *Begin Again*, make things easier on the romantic front: Neither has children, Raphina is in an on-off, "complicated" relationship with Evan but has not yet moved in with him, and Conor does not have any exes with whom to compare her. Perhaps because no families will break apart if Conor and Raphina end up together, they do. Not only that,

even though there is no sex in this film, either, at least they kiss three times over the course of the narrative—twice during the Dalkey Island scene, the film's equivalent to the Manhattan ramble and the Killiney Hill excursion in *Begin Again* and *Once*, respectively.

As noted above, *Sing Street* also stands out in the triptych because Raphina is neither a musician nor a musician in the making. However, this is no obstacle for her to become a source of inspiration or muse for Conor, who is also able to better his artistic output as a result. Although she does not—she cannot—improve Conor's compositions per se, Carney emphasises that her ideas on makeup and storytelling, her acting skills, and her persona make as invaluable a contribution to the music videos as the Girl's musical skills do to the Guy's songs, and Dan's production does to Gretta's. However, since *Sing Street* positions the formation of the band at the beginning of the narrative, we get to its "Falling Slowly" moment a few minutes later than in the other two films (27:50–32:25): The shooting of the music video for "The Riddle of the Model" is the first time in which, behind the highly derivative, far-from-achieved visuals, music, and lyrics, the couple discovers the potential of their artistic collaboration and begin to take each other's skills seriously after seeing them in action. It is not just that the band, despite their initial reservations, trust Raphina over their makeup and, as soon as they start shooting, she proves that, as Brendan puts it later, "she's world-class. Without her, [they're] just a bunch of gay-looking kids down an alleyway" (35:12–35:18). It is also that, despite her initial reservations about Conor and the discouraging scene she finds when she arrives at the filming location, the song, the storyboards, and Conor's display of stage mannerisms make her throw herself into the project, as expressed by her saying that she "can do anything" and the approving look she gives him during the shoot. Shortly before the film moves to the band's first attempt at building a musical reality (that is, to the music video itself), Carney makes sure that we do not miss how she looks at him by cutting from a frontal group shot (GS) of the band, in which the camera tilts up as Conor hops back to the microphone, to an LS of the alleyway before panning right to tightly frame her in profile and tie the previous shot to her POV (figure 14, 31:12–31:20).

**Figure 14**. *Sing Street*: Raphina sees in Conor the makings of a rock star. © 2016 Cosmo Films, Distressed Films, FilmNation Entertainment, FilmWave, Likely Story, PalmStar Media.

As is typical of Carney's numbers, the soundtrack begins to transition into the imaginary before the visuals do. In fact, it does so as soon as Darren presses "play" on their portable cassette recorder (30:35) and, instead of the low-fi sound of a home recording on tape, what we hear on the diegetic track is a studio-quality version of "The Riddle of the Model." The transition—or dissolve, in Altman's terms—goes on for about a minute, in which we hear other diegetic sounds in the aural background, such as those of the tripod and the hi-hat crashing to the floor when they accidentally bump into them. During this minute, the visuals stay anchored to reality, and what we see is a sort of making-of of the video by the same kind of third-person narrator that covered the recording of Gretta's album in the streets of NYC with a professional camera on a dolly. Since there is nothing in the action that can produce a loud sound after 30:15, we cannot tell for sure the exact moment when the aural transition is complete and all diegetic sounds apart from the song are actually muted. Visually, though, a cut at 31:33 abruptly takes us from reality into fantasy, from the making-of to the video itself, and from the eye-level shots and smooth movements of the professional camera to the interlaced, saturated, low-angle, low-res, shaky images shot by Darren on a handheld VHS camcorder.

This resource allows Carney to establish a clear-cut boundary between the real and musical realities within the storyworld, to visually relate the latter to the videos Conor watches on TV, and to set off the narrative progression that will lead him to tear down this boundary in the third act. Unfortunately, the fact that the aural transition from reality to fantasy has, as is often the case in Carney's films, more to do with the progressive muting of background noises than with any

significant changes in sound quality, which remains professional throughout, questions the existence of two levels of reality and detracts from the believability of the scene. Although there should have been a clear, audible difference between the sound of the making-of and video segments of the scene, it is hard to determine with absolute certainty which segment should have had the better sound. On the one hand, we could have transitioned from reality to fantasy as we do in, for instance, the second iteration of "A Step You Can't Back," progressively replacing the sound of the cassette recorder with a studio version of the song. On the other, although that seems the more sensible option, a journey in the opposite direction would have solved the mismatch between the poor quality of the camcorder images and the studio sound accompanying them. Be that as it may, fortunately, sound quality is the only discordant element in a scene where everything else points towards artistic potential and musical inexperience, especially "The Riddle of the Model" itself, a very catchy song that combines pretentiously naive, clichéd lyrics inspired by Conor's first encounter with Raphina with an extremely simple melody—basically built on two chords on a loop—and pop music motifs from the era, such as the slap bass and the Oriental riff.[155]

Only a few minutes of screen time—and only a few hours of diegetic time—later, the creative process starts all over again for the band's second song, "Up," in which Conor tries to explain how he feels right after spending the day with Raphina (36:50–40:50). As seen in the schoolyard scenes, Carney tries to make the creation of each song both similar and different to the others, while at the same time conveying a sense of artistic progression. We see that "Up" is again inspired by Raphina. That it responds to an urgent need. That it is heavily influenced by Brendan's music recommendations. That the lyrics are co-written by Conor at night, revised and first performed, albeit in a raw version, by him and Eamon at the latter's house, and then arranged further with the rest of the band. That it is recorded on tape, a copy of which is finally handed to Raphina, who in turn is touched by it.

This time, however, Raphina is not invoked in the lyrics in unnecessarily stilted language. Although she is a "mystery bound in perfection," her eyes are no longer "mysterious" but just something he "can't describe." Like the object of U2's "Elevation," she is now said to fill him with

[155] Vary, "Catchy '80s Music."

joy, to lift him out of his depressing everyday, physically and metaphorically, and to take him to an ideal reality that may be a dream, heaven, the "real" reality of Plato's allegory of the cave, or simply the utopian alternative musical reality of film musicals. However, this is not yet the self-assured Conor of "Drive It Like You Stole It": She is said to be at the wheel of a dream belonging to her and on which he "hitch[es] a ride" and, what is more, when "she turns to kiss [him, he] crash[es] back into bed" and later on goes "back in the dream"—or so he "think[s]." This time, the song is not finished on a weekday afternoon, but over a Saturday evening and the early hours of a Sunday morning ("It's two o'clock on the edge of the morning"). Brendan gives him advice but does not help him write the lyrics. There is a sense of urgency, but it does not have as much to do with the need to have a song to shoot a music video before Raphina sees through Conor's bluff as it does with putting in words the intensity of an emotion before it fades away, just as Gretta and Steve do after watching Dave on YouTube. The song is neither influenced by Duran Duran nor by a music video, but by the records of Joe Jackson and The Jam, which we see Conor and Eamon listening to right before they sit down to write it. Although just a few hours have passed in the storyworld since they recorded "The Riddle of the Model," we feel that they are already better at what they are doing. As if the song were already in Conor's head, in yet another sound bridge that serves to connect different places, we begin to hear the basic chords of the finished version of "Up" as he leaves Brendan's room. We continue hearing them as he cycles through the night streets of Dublin—made through music as harmless as those in *Once*—and arrives at Eamon's, before the pair go up to the latter's room (36:47–37:19). It is when the soundtrack cuts to the diegetic sound of "Steppin' Out" by Joe Jackson coming out of Eamon's record player that we stop hearing the melody of "Up." Whereas Eamon fleshed out "The Riddle of the Model" and first played it on an acoustic guitar, this time the melody is fleshed out on an electric guitar by Eamon and then first played on an acoustic guitar by Conor. Moreover, unlike what happened before, Conor seems to have a clear idea what the lyrics are about from the outset, and he does not strike any false notes when he starts singing.

In "The Riddle of the Model," we cut from Conor and Eamon using a Hoover hose—a subtle allusion to *Once*?—to create a DIY "Video Killed the Radio Star"-like radio voice lo-fi vocal effect as they start to record a rough acoustic version of the song, which then keeps playing briefly over the

scene in which Conor hands the tape supposedly containing it to Raphina. However, we do not hear a finished studio version of it until they shoot the video, nor do we ever see her listening to it. By contrast, "Up" is orchestrated and arranged and goes from location to studio sound as they first play it with the band. Moreover, as occurs in the second iteration of "A Step You Can't Take Back" in *Begin Again*, the entrance of the different instruments is staggered: We start with Conor singing and playing the acoustic guitar; Eamon follows at the piano; next, Ngig at the keyboards; then, Garry and Larry at the bass and drums, respectively; finally, before briefly returning to Conor and hearing everyone playing in unison for the first time, Eamon on the electric guitar.

In one of the most technically accomplished scenes in the film, Carney makes the most of actor blocking, space, and camera movement to visually convey progression, fluidity, cyclicity, and connection between different time levels through music. Much of the performance is covered in a *show-offy*, continuous 360-degree panning shot (figure 15, 38:08–39:40, the longest in the movie) that takes advantage of 1) the tight space to keep each band member off-screen until they enter the song; 2) the actors' placement in the scene (around Conor and by order of entrance) to naturally allow the camera to linger, push in, and/or close in on them as it pans by; and 3) the room's open door and one of the house's corridors to smoothly transition from night to daytime lighting, from Conor and Eamon performing the song on their own to the whole band doing it on a different day, from a raw to the final version of the song, and from location to studio sound. Moreover, when all the instruments finally get to play in unison, the camera reinforces the ideas of cyclicity and progression by returning to Conor and Eamon and showing them in different clothes and in different positions from those shown at the beginning. As if to further reinforce this, we also see that Eamon is not playing the piano he was playing when we last saw him on screen, but the electric guitar on which he composed the melody earlier in the sequence. Overall, as Harvey O'Brien puts it, the pan is "a Hitchcock-level camera movement with a real 'did he or didn't he' quality to it, but what it captures is that energy of the song moving forward from first steps to full performance […]."[156]

[156] O'Brien, "Face the Strange," 278.

**Figure 15**. *Sing Street*: shots from the 360-degree pan showing the creation of "Up." © 2016 Cosmo Films, Distressed Films, FilmNation Entertainment, FilmWave, Likely Story, PalmStar Media.

The fact that the synchrony of sound and image is maintained after we move from the raw to the final version makes it possible for Carney to again pass off a studio mix for location sound, even though the flawless sound we hear would be impossible to achieve in real life with the equipment and in the room we see. Once again, it does not matter. The song continues playing across the following scenes, moving in and out of the diegetic track and connecting additional times and places without any perceptible changes in quality. First, it becomes the musical accompaniment to a cutaway of Conor delivering a package containing a tape with—we assume—a recorded version of the song to the orphanage where Raphina lives on a different evening. Cut to her in her room, perhaps later that evening. The song continues playing on the music track as she unwraps the package, then it moves back to the diegetic track when she puts the tape into her portable cassette player and presses "play" to listen to it while removing her makeup, although it is impossible that the high-quality sound we hear could be produced by either the device we see or the amateur tape itself. As if the acts of recording and listening were taking place simultaneously and the music were able to transcend time

and space, we then cut back to the band playing at Eamon's—the first time we see them framed in an OTS GS from Conor's perspective, which emphasises their togetherness. Although almost everything in the mise-en-scène suggests that the action continues what we saw before the cutaway, the band is now accompanied by Darren and, like the Guy's father does at one point in *Once*, Eamon's mother is serving them tea and showing her enthusiasm for the band. The song stays on the diegetic soundtrack for this scene and the next, in which we return to Raphina's room to further emphasise the intimate connection between artists and audiences through music, whether live or recorded, and subtly introduce two of the things that Conor's plotline will explore next. Although Raphina is sitting at the vanity table in her room, by interspersing between her and the band with the song playing across, the impression is that these are parallel actions occurring in the same timeframe and, therefore, that Raphina's shots, like those of Dave listening to "Like a Fool" on his smartphone, are semantically equivalent to the audience reaction shots typical of the coverage of live performances.

In the frontal MCU of Raphina that closes off her segment, she is shown wearing no makeup and both sniffling and smiling in reaction to the song. However, before "Up" reaches its end, Carney cuts back to Conor and squeezes in one more scene and setting: Conor arriving at the school proudly wearing as much makeup as Raphina has just taken off and hearing the song in his mind. Although Conor's triumph is ultimately ephemeral, and Brother Baxter soon forcibly washes off the makeup, this chapter of the story focuses on the concept of happy-sad that Carney has just introduced visually through Raphina. Consequently, his defeat also proves to be short-lived. At the end of the school day, Raphina—accompanied by a non-diegetic instrumental piano version of "Take On Me," the song he sang for her when they first met—is waiting for him at the gate to give a name to the new musical alter-ego he is developing, to tell him that she liked "Up," to expand on *happy-sad*, and to do what the protagonist couples in Carney's musical films do when they are not making music or sitting in a café:[157] to get to know each other better as they walk around (and occasionally stop at and/or sit in) a street and/or a tourist landmark. On this occasion, it is St. Catherine's Park on Thomas Street in Dublin, a quaint churchyard where the clearly visible old headstones highlight the subject matter of

[157] In *Sing Street*, the age and lack of resources of the lead couple prevents the romance from unfolding in cafés. The only scene where they share a drink and a snack in a public place is the one on Dalkey Island.

the conversation, anticipate Conor's gothic/Cure-head phase, and, on a more general level, relate the movie to the *et in Arcadia ego* motif of the coming-of-age (sub)genre. Be that as it may, as he does in similar scenes in *Once* and *Begin Again*, Carney stages the scene as a rather conventional "walk and talk," with Conor and Raphina framed in two-shot most of the time and "a Steadicam carrying us along as [they] spit out exposition on the fly."[158] On a completely separate note, we can add that Carney uses the background to place a nostalgic Easter Egg for those who lived in Dublin during the 1980s: A passing rag-and-bone man's horse and cart, still a common sight in the city at the time that, like the people buried in the churchyard, are now long gone.

Whereas for "The Riddle of the Model" the processes of creating the song and shooting the music video are given similar importance, and for "Up" we focus on the creation of the song and the effect the tape has on Raphina, for "A Beautiful Sea," the happy-sad tune that culminates the chapter (50:09–51:39), we focus on the video only. In a way, it is as if "Up" signalled their progression from beginner to intermediate musicians, and now it is time to show that they have also made similar progress in the field of video production. From the moment we see them on the DART (49:09–50:09), we feel that although they are still a school band and have not yet fully developed their own style, the video has more scale and ambition, and nothing has been left to chance or improvisation. Unlike before, the location (the Dun Laoghaire pier), props (picture frames of different shapes and sizes), makeup (gothic white), and costumes (gothic black) have been fully thought through and picked up in advance to serve a story that aims to be original, happy-sad, and artsy. Even the storyboards reflect their progress and ambition and, with their watercolour colour—the technique in which we saw Conor excel in the art class—and appearance of crooked framed pictures, look more like illustrations for a children's book than storyboards. Although we do not know for certain whether the use of picture frames in the storyboards—and, later, in the video itself—should be read as an allusion to the band in which Carney used to play bass, The Frames, or a *The Quiet Man*-like metanarrative reflection on the opposition between reality and representation (figure 16), the truth is that it works on both levels while also bearing out the artsy intention and sense of purpose surrounding the video.

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[158] Bordwell, *The Way*, 184.

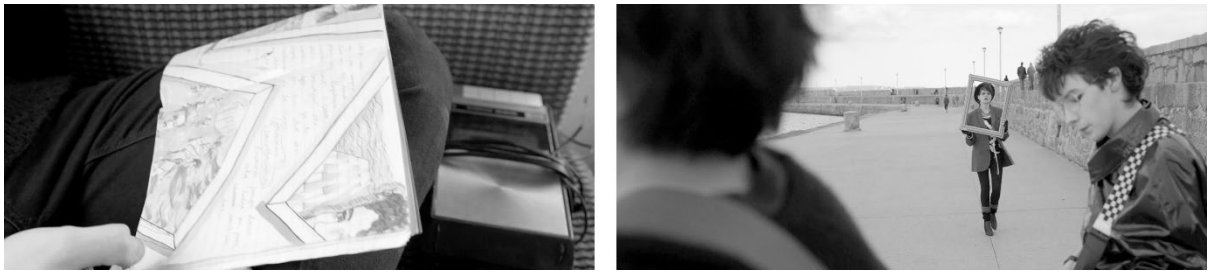

**Figure 16**. *Sing Street*: some of the frames in the production of "A Beautiful Sea." © 2016 Cosmo Films, Distressed Films, FilmNation Entertainment, FilmWave, Likely Story, PalmStar Media.

Raphina's invaluable contribution to Conor's artistic and personal growth is again highlighted. It is not just that her screen persona (now sporting a Molly Ringwald hat, pearls, and blazer) takes the video up a notch; her creative additions also clearly make it better, too. Thus, her imaginative, *Splash* (Howard, 1984)-like reinterpretation of Conor's story makes it more profound and solid. Then, by unexpectedly jumping into the sea without being able to swim and then crying for help, she not only improves the verisimilitude of the video but also forces Conor to suddenly grow into a hero, dive in to pull her out of the water, and dare to kiss her for the first time (51:12–52:00). However, as we said before, Conor's triumphs in this chapter are ephemeral and this one, despite its climactic value, is not exceptional: Right after kissing Raphina, he asks her about Evan and "ruin[s] it."

Again, the scene begins visually in the "real" reality of the storyworld—that is, by showing how they make the video rather than the video itself—and moves to the amateur, low-quality musical reality of the video later. There is, however, a sense of urgency that was largely absent from the previous shoot, as if with every composition the narrator felt the need to tell us less and less about the creative process. Thus, we get to the set without knowing anything about the song for which they are about to shoot a video, many of the on-set preparations we saw before are skipped, and the opening chords of "A Beautiful Sea" fade in non-diegetically while the band is still discussing how to best dive from the pier.

The song then moves to the diegetic track and continues playing over the band imitating playing their instruments and Conor lip-syncing for the video. As before, what we hear for a while is flawless studio sound trying to pass off as location sound, and lyrics that sum up Conor's feelings and

musical influences throughout the chapter. On this occasion, the Cure-influenced tune first explores the concept of happy-sad by contrasting their depressing reality ("Fake deals in the supermarket / TVs selling what you can't get / […] Gray cars crawling in the slow lane / Lost stars waiting for the DART train") with Raphina's ability to find a silver lining in every cloud ("She laughs, 'Nowhere is as pretty as this' / […] She smiles, turns and blows the city a kiss"). *Happy-sad* is further explored by relating the sea to a sense of liberating joy that has as much to do with the Romantic/Gothic sweet (drowning) death as it does with emigration. If the lyrics of "Up" conveyed an idea of elevation, and in them Raphina pulled Conor up away from Dublin and into a sort of heaven, now she is "a beautiful sea" that, like the narrator of "In Between Days," invites him to do two seemingly irreconcilable things at the same time: take a journey in the opposite direction of that in "Up" and sink and drown him in the sea, and leave everything behind, look ahead, and emigrate:

> Under the waves I feel her pull my body down
> Under the waves she takes me where I wanna drown
> I can be miles away, she calls to me
> This girl is a beautiful sea
>
> Freeze-frame graffiti at the bus stop
> Star Wars, chewing gum, and punk rock
> She says, "What d'you say we give this a miss?"
>
> Let's go, take me where the wind blows
> Sail ships far into tomorrow
> We can turn and blow the city a kiss

What are these teenagers really wishing for then, to live or die? While Raphina's sudden, unexpected dive anchors the action more firmly in the lyrics, her cries for help make it clear that she has no intention of dying a sweet gothic death and, therefore, that their fascination with death is simply an artistic pose. When it comes to the other issue at stake, emigration, although we have to wait until the end of the narrative to know that Conor really meant what he was saying, Carney ably uses the scene to reintroduce it into the story, to shift the focus away from the band momentarily, and to begin to create the build-up to a climax where the hero's journey will be shown to be incomplete unless he dares to emigrate. Leaving aside the fact that, as we have just said, the lyrics touch upon

emigration, it is highly unlikely that the harbour the kids choose to shoot their video would pass unnoticed for anyone familiar with the history of Irish emigration, as for more than a century many emigrants would embark there for Liverpool.[159] Furthermore, in case the viewer has missed the references to emigration in the location and the song, Carney makes his characters talk about it and anticipate the film's ending in one of his walk-and-talk scenes right after the shoot (52:26–54:32).

The dialogue begins with Conor casually pointing out how close—in fact, so close that you can "just about see it" on a clear day—the coast of Wales is to where they are, thus making their attempt to sail there on a small boat at the end of the narrative slightly more believable. Next, although it is too soon for him to connect the dots, he himself tells Raphina and the viewer why the only way to achieve a happy ending is by emigrating. He explains that, according to Brendan, all "the great artists had to get off this island. The ones who stayed got depressed and turned into alcoholics," adding that his brother had planned to run away to Germany[160] when he was younger, but their mother "found out and closed it down." In other words, despite the potential Conor is showing, if he does not emigrate at the end, either he is not such a great artist after all, or he is and will become a depressive alcoholic—not what Brendan is exactly, but close. As has happened before in the film, though, Conor's family problems may be serious, but they are far surpassed by Raphina's. Perhaps Penny's excessive love for Brendan crushed his artistic aspirations, but Raphina seems to imply, albeit rather offhandedly, that her late father's for her may have turned into something much more sinister: sexual abuse. As she reflects on the times when she and her father were alone because her mother was in hospital and he did not allow her to go out with her friends because "he love[d her] too much," she wonders why he "bother[ed] with her" when her mum is "much better-looking" than she is—a remark that also provides extra background to her attraction to the older Evan, makes Conor's toilet incident with Brother Baxter look shallow by comparison and, looking at the distressed look on his face upon hearing it and on the train back home, Conor clearly interprets as we do.

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[159] See further, e.g., Deirdre M. Mageean, "Emigration from Irish Ports," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 13, no.1 (1993): 6–30, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27501112.

[160] Although we are never told why, of all places, Brendan wanted to go to Germany, it should be noted that two British pop icons, David Bowie and Freddie Mercury, lived there for a while in the 1970s and 1980s, respectively. Years before them, The Beatles cut their teeth performing at clubs in Hamburg for several months between 1960 and 1962.

Returning to the video shoot scene itself, we said before that, as for "The Riddle of the Model," it starts in a "real" reality of implausible spotless sound. What we did not say is that, unlike what occurred before, we do not keep hearing this kind of sound throughout the whole scene, nor do we stay in the fantasy once we get to the first amateur video shot. At 51:03, we cut to an OTS of Raphina from beside Conor that frames her in LS holding a picture frame in front of her face and walking along the pier (figure 16). Then, as Conor sings the line "She smiles and blows the city a kiss," she does exactly that and heads for the water. As the camera pans to follow her, Conor momentarily blocks her, creating the expectation of a wipe-cut that, however, never takes place: When we get to see her again, the framing and actor and camera movement are all the same as before. Cut to a side VWS of Raphina jumping into the water as Conor sings "Under the waves I feel her pull my body down" and then to a frontal GS of the band with location sound, which we keep hearing over the next two shots. Cut to a low-angle medium long shot of Conor rushing towards the edge of the pier from Raphina's POV. Cut to a high-angle reverse shot of Raphina in the water from Conor's POV. Cut to an amateur-video, slightly low-angle, panning profile MCU of Conor as he begins to jump into the water. Over the visuals, the studio version of the song fades back in. Cut to a side, high-quality film VWS of Conor completing the jump and the band standing on the edge of the pier from the same angle as we saw Raphina jumping before. We then cut twice between amateur footage of Raphina and Conor in the water and film footage of the band staring at them from the edge of the pier. Lastly, when we return to the lead couple a third time as seen from the pier, what we get is also film footage.

As often occurs in *Once* and *Begin Again*, this segment of the scene conveys a much more dynamic relationship between reality and fantasy than "The Riddle of the Model" on the visual and aural planes. It is not simply that the frame holding Raphina reminds us that, although there are two levels of reality and only one has been established as real, both are ultimately representations and, therefore, neither can ever be considered 100% real. It is also that right after that shot, the third-person narrator reveals that the flawless sound that we heard during the recording of "The Riddle of the Model" and which we have been hearing up to this moment in the scene is not real location sound either but Conor's idealised version of it—significantly, it is only when he loses his concentration and

steps out of character that we are allowed to hear it and, as soon as the shoot resumes, the studio sound fades back in.

Moreover, whereas visually "The Riddle of the Model" established a clear-cut boundary between film-reality and video-fantasy through the footage, framing, and editing, the idea is that at this stage, the boundary has started to blur. As Conor dives into the ocean to rescue Raphina, there is no way to tell for sure whether she can swim—although she will confirm later that her cries for help were real, the only thing we know at that moment is that her impulsive action will result in a better, more believable music video. Carney highlights this ambiguity by editing the rescue as a juxtaposition of amateur video and professional film, that is, by alternating between the footage that "The Riddle of the Model" associated with (their still imperfect) fantasy, and the footage used throughout the movie to convey the "real" reality. In fact, it is worth noticing that the use of amateur video comes to an end as soon as Raphina and Conor reach the safety of the pier stairs; accordingly, when Conor first dares to kiss her a few seconds later, the only possible interpretation is that the kiss is real and not a figment of Conor's imagination.

Although the studio-quality sound the band has from the start belongs in a level of reality different from that established as real, the shaky, low-quality video footage and clumsy editing of the clips for "The Riddle of Model" and "A Beautiful Sea," while clearly signalling the existence of both a musical and a "real" reality, suggests that Conor and his friends are at best on the threshold of the former, just as they are on the threshold of adulthood. As Brendan points out while watching the band's first music video, these clips are "a means to an end," and the enhanced reality they present, while certainly better than that of their Dublin everyday, is still much too dependent on it and, therefore, quite far from that of the exotic escapist fantasies of "Rio" and "Gold." In other words, like "Falling Slowly" and the imaginary arranged version of "A Step You Can't Take Back," "The Riddle of the Model" first shows the potential of an artistic collaboration between the protagonist couple. However, if "Falling Slowly" can be compared to sexual intercourse and "A Step You Can't Take Back" to masturbation, "The Riddle of the Model" is the equivalent of two teenagers awkwardly kissing and fondling each other for the first time, trying to conceal their inexperience by imitating what they have seen couples do on TV.

By the time Conor rehearses and then shoots the video for "Drive It Like You Stole It" (1:08:58–1:13:30), things are different. He has been learning to use his imagination to create a truly ideal, fully-fledged musical reality out of pieces from his dull everyday, and he has been almost able to inhabit it while shooting "A Beautiful Sea." He has finally learned to "drive it like you stole it" and, unlike what we saw in the schoolyard, where it was basically the music of other bands that told him how to cope with his problems, and what we heard in his previous songs, where it was Raphina who pulled him in a certain direction, now it is his own music (with the help of a few *steals* from Hall & Oates and his own agency) that does so. This time, then, it does not really matter that Raphina stands him up. That there are almost no extras for the video, and the ones who have bothered to show up have not seen the film he wants to use as reference material and are unable to perform even a basic dance routine. That there is no money for sets, costumes, or a decent camera. That, on a more general level, Brother Baxter is still tyrannically running the school, that he has just learned that his parents are splitting up and selling the house, and that Brendan is not the cynical, music-wise stoner he thought he was, but a deeply disillusioned person who used to be a budding musician just like he is now. And all this does not matter because, this time, Conor dives head-first into an "idealized space […] that represents [the] diametrical opposite"[161] of the storyworld's "real" reality—exclusively through his own music and imagination. In other words, if there is a scene in *Sing Street* that can be compared to Dan's imaginary orchestration of Gretta's song in *Begin Again* (and, therefore, to a solitary act of masturbation), this is it.

In pure classic musical fashion, the transition is successfully negotiated through an audio and video dissolve at the beginning of the number. The about 35-second (1:10:12–1:10:48) dissolve starts with a Lorraine Baines-like Raphina opening the gym door and culminates in a 270-degree crane shot that takes us back to the stage to show the band wearing Marvin Berry and the Starlighters-like matching suits and hairdos, surrounded by equipment and décor reminiscent of those on the stage of the Enchantment Under the Sea Dance in *Back to the Future.* As in the second iteration of "A Step You Can't Take Back," the transition from reality to imagination is signalled aurally by a subtle, progressive, yet clearly perceptible improvement in sound quality—in this case, the initial

[161] Altman, *Film Musical*, 74.

reverberation fades out as the song progresses and we go deeper into Conor's fantasy—and the entrance of further instruments and background vocals into the song. It should be noted, though, that unlike what usually happens in film musicals, the sound established as real at the start of the scene does not move to the music track as we go into the fantasy but remains diegetic throughout. If anything, it changes from pre-recorded/external to live/internal diegetic sound, thus adding a new dimension to the paradox of documenting "a live performance that is already staged and fabricated."[162]

Although the cinematography changes as we go deeper into the fantasy, the initial staging and camera setup build on those used to cover Gretta's arrival at Dave's concert in *Begin Again*, to the extent that the door through which Raphina will enter the gym later in the scene occupies the same position with respect to the stage as the side door through which Gretta enters the theatre does with respect to the Gramercy stage. Although properly speaking this is not a live performance, Carney starts by covering it as if it were one, interspersing low-angle shots of Conor and the band from right below the stage, either from Darren's or from one of the impromptu dancers' perspective, low-angle shots of the stage from behind the dancers/audience, and OTS shots from Conor's perspective. At 1:09:47, we cut to Miss Dunne to establish that she is sitting by the door and to introduce her POV, to which we move next. As the song begins, we continue alternating between these shots for a few seconds and then cut to a side OTS from Conor's perspective that shows both Miss Dunne and the door—the same camera angle used to signal that Dave notices Gretta standing by the access door in *Begin Again*. Then, the scene cuts to a side CU of Conor, which can be interpreted as either Miss Dunne's viewpoint or, alternatively, a third-person narrator's. After a shot-reverse-shot of the door and Conor, the second time we return to the door, fantasy has started to take over the visuals, and the 1950s version of Raphina is beginning to pull it open (figure 17). The panels, however, show that the door has not yet moved to the fantasy. Neither has Conor, to whom we return one more time before going full fantasy mode: When we cut back to the 1950s Raphina, the background door and wall have been decorated in American blue and red (figure 17).

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[162] Landesman, "*The Last Waltz*."

The camera tracks Raphina in CU as she does what Dan and the Girl do at the start of *Begin Again* and *Once*, respectively: approach the stage mesmerised by the performance (figure 17). However, this is not the stranger's fantasy but the musician's. Ably and economically, Carney uses the background of the tracking shot to smoothly complete the visual dissolve. As Raphina advances towards the stage with the band playing off-screen, we can see more and more people in 1950s costumes dancing in the background, as well as more details of the American prom décor. In addition, the fact that we keep seeing her looking entranced at the off-screen space where the sequence has established the stage creates an increasing sense of anticipation. When she reaches the front row, Carney finishes the transition by finally revealing what she has been looking at through a complex movement that directs the camera away from her. Similar to the camera-lens movement that precedes the first on-screen appearance of Dan in *Begin Again*, this complex movement—comprising a simultaneous 270-degree pan and a slight tilt upwards—draws attention upon itself and ensures that the viewer does not underestimate the narrative importance of Conor's first on-screen appearance in 1950s costume (figure 17).

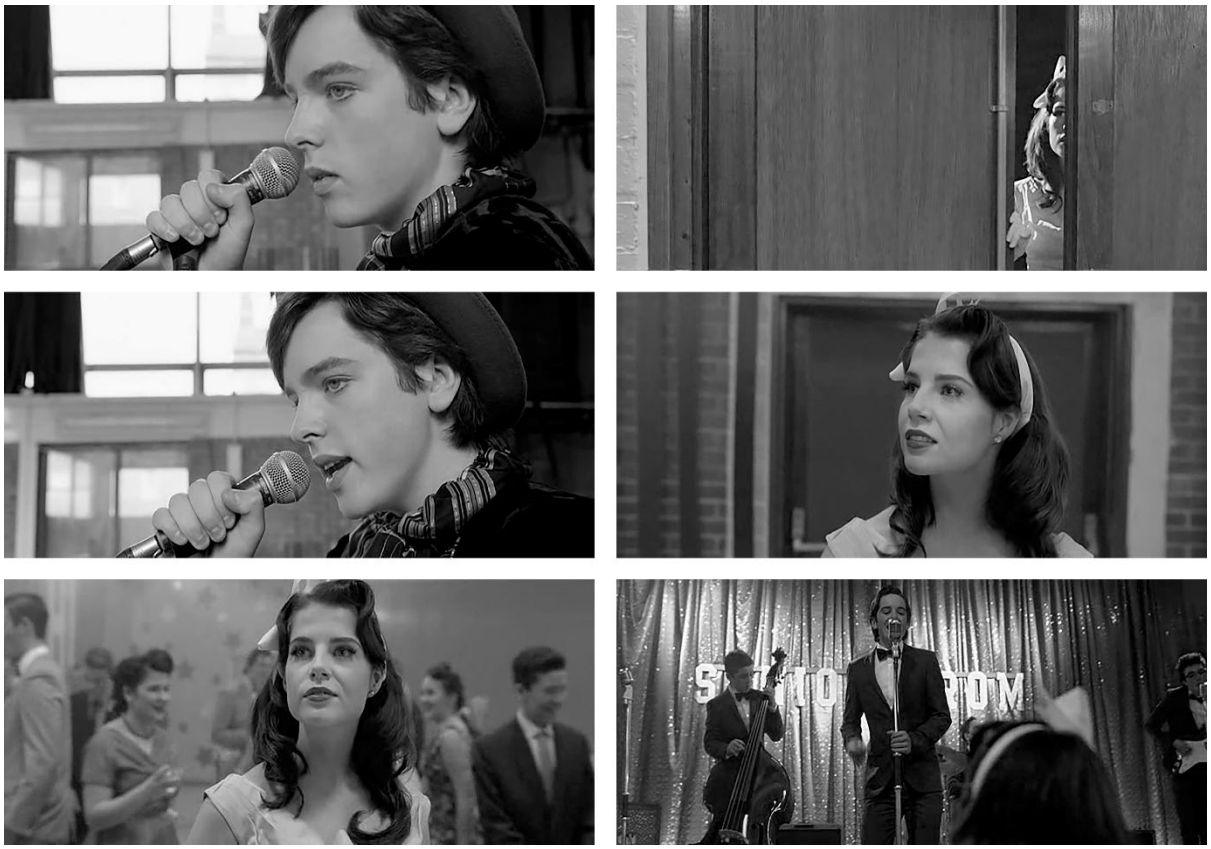

**Figure 17**. *Sing Street*: from 1980s reality to 1950s fantasy. © 2016 Cosmo Films, Distressed Films, FilmNation Entertainment, FilmWave, Likely Story, PalmStar Media.

The low-angle group MS of Conor and the band that results from the movement establishes Raphina's POV for the rest of the scene or, rather, what Conor wishes were her view of him and their relationship. Conor's fantasy is both analeptic and proleptical in this respect. On the one hand, it evokes their first encounter, when he spotted her on her stage-like stoop, crossed the street to approach her, and then stayed on a lower level throughout the conversation (12:22–14:55). In that scene, Raphina is first introduced in bokeh in the background of a two-shot of Darren and Conor at the school gate, but we cannot really see her until a camera movement allows us to do so while also highlighting the importance of the moment. The camera stays on Conor as he crosses the street and only begins to drift away from him when he is already close to the "first row" at the bottom of the stairs, framing her in full shot first and then pushing in to a low-angle CU that reflects Conor's physical and emotional position (of inferiority) with respect to her. Conversely, in Conor's fantasy, it is Raphina who approaches him and then looks up to and at his 1950s self from a lower position—just as she told him she would do on Dalkey Island.

On the other hand, Raphina's entrance, as many other things in Conor's fantasy, can also be said to be proleptic because they anticipate what will occur at the live performance that climaxes the narrative: the band's act at the end-of-term school disco and, in particular, their performance of "Brown Shoes." As Gretta does at the end of *Begin Again*, and as her 1950s fantasy self did earlier in the film, Raphina arrives late to Conor's concert and enters the now Gramercy-like lit venue through the gym's side door. Unlike what occurs in *Begin Again*, though, we first cut away to her when she is still outside the venue and, while we are allowed to keep hearing "Brown Shoes," a diegetic switch moves it to the music track (1:33:20–1:33:23). We see her walking towards the gym through the same stretch of schoolyard we have seen Conor walking through five times before, and we feel that the tables are turned in the relationship between Raphina and him. For the first time, the camera tracks a girl walking through the schoolyard of this all-boys school at night. More importantly, for the first time, it is Raphina who is coming up to Conor and, what is more, she is doing it wearing a rather similar costume to the one she was wearing when he first approached her.

When the visuals cut back to the interior of the gym and "Brown Shoes" returns to the diegetic track, we swish pan from a side CU of Conor to a high-angle WS of the door from his POV in which, apart from the mask-wearing revellers and Miss Dunne, we can see Raphina opening the door. Cut to a backwards tracking shot that frames her in MCU as she begins to advance, happily and admiringly, towards the front row (1:33:28). With the intra-textual allusion to the 1950s fantasy already well-established and no need whatsoever to present the setting again, the movie proceeds to focus on the exchange of glances between Conor and Raphina as she walks towards the stage (1:33:30–1:33:39). Edited in conventional shot-reverse-shot fashion, it finishes with a lateral tracking shot towards the opposite side of the swish pan that briefly highlights the ecstatic reaction of the audience and the fact that all are wearing masks before going back to, and circling around, Raphina to finish with her in profile from the other side. From her, we move on to the band by cutting to a CU of the (until then, off-screen) drums, which is quickly reframed into successive MSs of Larry, Garry, and Ngig playing their respective instruments through a handheld tilt-pan. We cut back to the audience from Conor's POV and then, like we did in *Begin Again* when Gretta first noticed Dave's ecstatic fans, reframe the shot through a quick diagonal tilt upwards that ends in a side OTS MCU shot of Conor (1:33:47). Cut to a low-angle MCU of Conor from Gretta's POV and then to her wearing a Brother Baxter mask and dancing ecstatically in the front row, from which we return to Conor by performing yet another camera movement similar to one in his fantasy: The camera dollies backwards with respect to Raphina and then tilts up to pick up Conor again on stage, allowing us to just see the top of her head and her waving arms as she continues dancing in the foreground (1:33:51–1:34:01). Back to a frontal MCU of Raphina and alternate for a few seconds between him and her before allowing the song to again connect two different times and places. As at the end of *Begin Again*, we cut away to an action that takes place after the gig has finished (Conor and Raphina rush out of the school hand-in-hand in the middle of the night, realising another fantasy they talked about on Dalkey Island) while the song is still going on, before returning to the gym to see the end of the gig.

Although Raphina is the main object of Conor's fantasy, the ideal, colourful musical world of the 1950s American prom also allows him to respond successively and successfully to the tyranny of Brother Baxter, his parents' separation, Brendan's ennui, and even Evan's rivalry for the love of

Raphina. Thus, in the fantasy, Brother Baxter, whose black cassock stands out among the bright-colour-clad dancers, does not cause the music to break off but instead gives Conor a blessing and a thumbs-up after he performs a series of somersaults and a full split (1:11:05–1:11:18). Robert, whose white blazer and bowtie resemble George McFly's (Crispin Glover) in *Back to the Future*, and Penny do not look like a marriage in crisis but happy newly-weds straight out of a 1950s film (1:11:20–1:11:44). Brendan does not look like a slacker but like a pastiche of 1950s teen (anti)heroes: His costume and hairdo could be inspired by *Rebel without a Cause* and his motorcycle by *The Wild One*, and his switchblade could fit into either of these films or even *West Side Story* (Wise and Robbins, 1961). Furthermore, it is he who notices that Evan is molesting Raphina and makes him leave the gym after beating him in a knife fight (1:11:45–1:12:25).

Each of these segments has been similarly staged and edited, although it is difficult to tell whether this is intended to strengthen the unity of the scene through parallelism or to emphasise Conor's inexperience as a filmmaker. Whatever the reason, each builds on the basic pattern established with Raphina at the beginning of the scene. That is, each character is first shown at the door looking approvingly at Conor from his POV. Then, as the rest of the attendants make a passageway through which they move towards the centre of the gym, the scene basically progresses in shot-reverse-shot fashion, alternating between high-angle tracking shots of the new arrivals from Conor's perspective and low-angle shots of him from theirs, plus a few shots from a third-person narrator. Each character then performs a brief solo number in the centre of the room and finishes by making a gesture of approval towards Conor. It should also be noted that a third-person narrator WS from the back of the gym is used to both enter and leave this part of the scene, that is, to transition from the segment focused on Raphina to the solo numbers, and from the latter to the scene's climax: an old-school musical choreography routine that contemporary audiences can also read as a flash mob and which within the storyworld itself signals the triumph of Conor's community-building efforts, as the scene makes us feel as though everyone around Conor were finally part of the Sing Street community by participating in the choreography—even Barry, who is briefly featured dancing in one of the rows. Encouraged and directed by Conor from the stage, the choreography is, however, mostly told by a third-person narrator who speeds up the pace by keeping the camera in constant movement,

hinders our identification with any individual dancer by repeatedly indulging in camera angles that cannot possibly match any character's eyeline, and keeps us focused on the group dance moves by eschewing single or tight framings of individual dancers. In addition, the on-stage camera, which has been mainly used so far to show the audience from Conor's POV, is used extensively in this part of the scene to give us unprecedented access to the band, quite often pushing in, pushing out, and panning to focus alternatively on specific members and the whole group without cutting.

As noted above, it is not just the resolution of the romantic subplot that the 1950s fantasy prefigures. Many other elements from the fantasy are also referenced in the final act, creating the feeling that, although real life cannot possibly be like a 1950s American high school film, music has the power to change things for the better. As he did before in the film and in *Begin Again*, Carney relies on the conventions of the broadcasting and recording of live events and simulates the existence of four cameras covering the performance. The first camera is positioned in the third or fourth row and shows WSs of the stage, the band, and the backs of the front audience. The second is placed right below the stage and shows low-angle MCUs of Conor. It is not associated with anyone's POV until Raphina arrives in the first row, when it becomes the expression of her viewpoint. The third is a handheld on-stage camera that keeps pushing in, pushing out, tilting, panning, and swish panning so as to shift between different details of the performance, and even between the band and the audience, without cutting to a new shot. Along with the fourth camera, which is initially placed on the stage facing the audience, it serves to offer reaction shots, to convey Conor's POV of the audience, and to cover both Raphina's entrance and Brother Baxter's exit during "Brown Shoes."

As he does in *Once* and *Begin Again*, and even though the studio quality sound of the songs very much questions the realism of the sequence, Carney periodically reminds us that this is an amateur performance in front of a non-paying audience at a non-professional venue where one should be ready for things to take a turn for the worse. The stage and room decoration is basic, and so is the lighting. Conor's microphone whirrs at the start of the gig, and a perceptible reverberation accompanies each of his introductions to the songs. They are called *faggots* four times. Many students arrive late, seemingly more interested in getting drunk than in the gig itself. The venue is almost empty when Conor starts playing "To Find You," a slow song that the audience boos when he

introduces it. A drunk skinhead jumps on stage right before they begin to play "Brown Shoes." Furthermore, the ominous presence of Brother Baxter in the room is the most powerful reminder that the concert may break off abruptly at any moment and, in fact, it almost does so when he tells Brother Barnaby to switch on the lights upon hearing Conor announce that their last song is about him.

This notwithstanding, throughout the sequence, we are never allowed to forget that this is both the equivalent of the opening night of the classic musical and the final stage in the build-up to the narrative climax of another feel-good film by Carney. As crowds do in Carney's films whenever they love a performance, the audience comes closer to the stage shortly after they begin to play "Girls," and soon after they start cheering, applauding, and banging their heads to the song. "To Find You" allows Conor to tell Raphina his feelings for her across time and space and moves her to come to the school disco. A skinhead prevents Brother Barnaby from turning on the lights by bashing the switches with a fire extinguisher. Conor's music has turned Barry into an ally, and we see him carrying out his newly assigned roadie duties throughout the concert and, in a full reversal of his initial role in the story, it is he who bounces the drunken skinhead off the stage. As Conor dedicates "Brown Shoes" to "every Christian Brother and every bully you ever knew" and then starts the song by provocatively alluding to Brother Baxter's previous mistreatment of him ("You wear a dress and tell me not to wear brown shoes / You think you're man enough to wash the makeup off my face right now?"), we know that we have reached the film's climax and are about to witness the final showdown between the story's hero and its villain. Like he did with Barry (who, incidentally, is also briefly addressed in the line "If he wants me dancing, he can watch on MTV"), albeit at a much more modest scale, Conor uses the power that music has given him to stand up to Brother Baxter and defeat him by openly defying his authority in front of—and, on this occasion, with the help of—the whole community.

It is at this moment that *Sing Street* most explicitly connects with the "dismissal of the establishment" that Barton finds in much of recent Irish cinema.[163] The song's lyrics leave little room for ambiguity: Brother Baxter's tyranny and oppression have lasted long enough ("the bigger that they are the harder they fall", "you had your time in the sun"), but music has empowered them so much that no matter what the clergyman does ("Who the hell are you to tell me what to do?", "You try to

[163] Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 225.

shut me up / I'll turn the volume up / And drown you out"), the tables have been turned ("the boot's on the other foot now"). At last, they are strong enough and ready to overthrow his reign of terror, and this is exactly what they are doing, so he had better accept that the end is inevitable and near, and that his tight grip on them is about to become a thing of "the past":

> Buckle up, we're taking your down
> See, your curtain's falling, so take your bow
>
> Cause you had your time in the sun
> And it's no use banging your drum
> […]
>
> Start facing the truth
> You're stuck in a lie
> Sharp end of your knife is pointing at you
> Your up will be down
> […]
> Your mask is slipping, so take your bow

As Conor has been insisting throughout the narrative, he is "writing the future," and so was Ireland at the time, beginning to see through the pious facade of the Catholic Church ("your mask is slipping") and readying itself to take them to task for their gross abuses over the following decade.

Despite the incendiary, rebellious nature of the lyrics, the visuals convey that it is not just Conor's rebellion against Brother Baxter that we are witnessing. Conor is able to triumph over him because the majority of the audience, including a young teacher beside Miss Dunne, joins in—and, therefore, joins the music-based community he has been forming since the beginning—by wearing the DIY masks of Brother Baxter the band has made as soon as he throws them from the stage (figure 18). Apart from coating the scene with a surreal, eerie aura, the masks intra-textually relate it to the group choreography in Conor's 1950s fantasy and, inter-textually, to two popular works from the 1980s: the film *Footloose* (Ross, 1984) and Alan Moore and David Lloyd's graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (1982–89), made into a film in 2005. It is not just that the masks give the crowd a sense of purpose, unity, and intimate communion with the band as evoked in Conor's fantasy; it is also that they turn the disco into a former-fish-out-of-water-led act of mass protest/rebellion against a political-theocratic tyranny similar to those at the end of *Footloose* and *V for Vendetta.* Thus, at the climax of the former, Ren

McCormack (Kevin Bacon), a teen urbanite who moves to a small town in the rural Southwest of the United States at the start of the narrative, brings down the ban on dancing within the town limits instigated by the local minister by defiantly hosting a prom in an old mill just outside of town. At the climax of the film version of the latter, thousands of people overthrow the fascist regime Britain has become in the alternative 1990s in which the story is set by defiantly taking to the streets on Guy Fawkes' Night wearing the Guy Fawkes masks that another outsider, V (Hugo Weaving), has previously mass-distributed across the nation.

**Figure 18**. *Sing Street*: the DIY masks of Brother Baxter. © 2016 Cosmo Films, Distressed Films, FilmNation Entertainment, FilmWave, Likely Story, PalmStar Media.

However, unlike what occurs in *Footloose* and Conor's fantasy, where the clergyman ends up giving his blessing to the young dancers, the Brother Baxter we see at the disco remains inflexible, and it is only his fear of the lack of fear of him that he sees in the mask-wearing students that ultimately makes him take his leave and allow the event to go on. In what is most likely another allusion to the 1950s fantasy, his movement towards the exit is not only exactly the opposite of what we saw him doing when he entered the gym in the fantasy but is also covered from the same angle. We can add that, unlike in *V for Vendetta*, where the masks appropriate both one of the most notorious characters in British popular history and public enemy number one in the narrative, in *Sing Street* it is the Synge Street CBS tyrant himself whom the masks appropriate, not Conor or, for that matter, any historical Irish rebel. Pretty much as it would happen in real life in Ireland from the 1990s onwards, in *Sing Street*, then, with pop music and dance as a catalyst, the tyranny of the Church is

ultimately defeated by putting “the boot on the other foot”: They make Brother Baxter look at himself through the eyes of his victims and experience first-hand the same kind of fear that Conor and the rest of students would experience every time they ran into him. Prefiguring what the Christian Brothers did in 2008, when they handed over their Irish schools to a trust after the flood of abuse accusations that were systematically settled in favour of the victims, Brother Baxter rushes to the exit without even really understanding how his once absolute power has slipped through his fingers.

It is only when our teen hero has slain the symbolic dragon with the help of the community and is almost both an adult and an artist that Raphina reappears. As said before, after contributing to making Conor’s fantasy real by doing most of the things we saw her doing in the 1950s prom, she goes on to accompany him on the last stage of his journey and tie off the narrative with an unconventionally happy ending for Conor, Brendan, and herself—an ending where the only thing we can be sure of is that, unlike the suicidal teen protagonists of *On the Edge*, the three of them have been able to transition successfully into adulthood.

## 5. Conclusion

> […] nobody knows where [film]'s gonna go or where it'll change. I think I'm okay because I figured myself out as a filmmaker, which is that I'm going to do music films. And music films are like action films but without the explosion.[1]

Pretty much like Dan and Conor do at the start of *Begin Again* and *Sing Street*, respectively, Carney's musicals tried to bluff their way into the hard-fought attention of twenty-first-century audiences by shrouding themselves in marketing discourses aimed at making audiences believe they were something different than they were—something more suited to the tastes of the audience segment(s) that each film's marketers needed to lure into cinemas to recoup its production and advertising costs. The very low-budget musical *Once* was advertised at first as an amateurish, (semi-)documentary romance film that niche audiences at film festivals could enjoy; *Begin Again*, a mid-budget, star vehicle, US remake of *Once*, as an original, wide-appeal musical rom-com in the style of *Once*, and the coming-of-age period musical dramedy *Sing Street* as a loosely autobiographical musical with both mainstream and niche appeal, yet closer to the spirit of *Once* than *Begin Again.* Critics soon saw through each of these attempts at deceiving audiences and, although they did not mind them in the cases of *Once* and *Sing Street*, the results did weigh negatively in the critical assessment of *Begin Again.*

First and foremost, the three films fit into the generic mould of the backstage or show musical, which Hollywood first cast with films such as *The Broadway Melody* (Beaumont, 1929) and *42nd Street* (Bacon, 1933) in the midst of the Broadway craze it developed as soon as the interest of Depression audiences in the novelty of synchronised sound began to wane. Nevertheless, rather than simply bringing successful stage musicals to the big screen, what the classics of the (sub)genre do is highlight the (dis)continuities between cinema and theatre by focusing most of the narrative on the ups and downs of the making of a stage musical or any other work of (musical) art, especially the rehearsals, and the difficult lives of and opposites-attract romance between two of the lead artists in the production. That is, the main plotlines tend to go beyond the theatre stage and concentrate on

[1] "IFTN talks."

things viewers cannot possibly have access to when they sit down to watch a live performance. It is towards the ending that we return to the confines of the theatre to see the plotlines converge and climax in the successful opening night of the show and let ourselves be tricked into believing that the carefully staged, filmed, and edited numbers on screen are being performed live before us, that we are sitting in a Broadway theatre rather than our local cinema, and that it is only natural that we identify with one of the diegetic front row viewers and yet keep seeing the stage from different angles and distances throughout the scene.

As late offshoots of this long-standing Hollywood musical tradition, the Carney musicals present us with an urban opposites-attract, boy-meets-girl story closely intertwined with the creation of a musical work of art, so that the numbers that show the different stages of the music-making process—from the early writing of songs to the emotional effects they have on listeners—also move the romance plot forward. Although the naturalistic, folk-musical/rockumentary mise-en-scène and the fact that the characters are musicians make it look otherwise, several numbers are sparked from conversations and offer glimpses of an idealised, musical reality in which the marginalised protagonists enjoy some agency, before the successful completion of the work of art grants them such agency in the storyworld's "real" reality. As is typical in both the backstage and folk musical subgenres, the Carney musicals also show a nostalgic fondness for and continuity with live performances and communal music rituals, with a distinctive emphasis on amateur practices like busking, open-mic nights, and school dances.

Music recording formats, reproduction devices, and industry practices regarded as obsolete or at least dated in the audience's increasingly digital present also feature prominently in *Once*, *Begin Again*, and *Sing Street*. Although this may be an indication that the nostalgic fondness above also applies to them, the audio-visual technologies available to the protagonists and their willingness and ability to make the most of them turn out to be as crucial for their personal and professional goals as their artistic skills. There may be no smartphones in *Once*, but in Carney's universe, technology—especially affordable, portable electronic devices where music and/or video can be recorded and reproduced with acceptable quality—is an invaluable asset for peripheral, amateur artists. Indeed, although a live performance climaxes *Sing Street* and Gretta ends up distributing her music

independently online, the work of art towards which the professional plot thread advances in the three films is not the conventional opening night of classic show musicals, but a demo aimed at industry professionals that may not even allow them to live off their music.

The protagonists' lack of material gains at the end, along with the fact that only in *Sing Street* does the protagonist couple end up together, could make us think that these films end up on an utterly unconventional sour note. However, although they do deviate from the genre in that they fail to put forward an alternative to marriage for the immigrant woman to assimilate into her host society, these are not rags-to-riches plots, and neither is the final separation of the protagonist couple a rare occurrence in post-classic musicals. Rather, these are plots of transformation/redemption where the possibility of a happy ending largely depends on the protagonists' ability to get over the disenchantment, stasis, and displacement caused by a traumatic change that has turned them into a fish out of water. During the narrative, they have to intimately (re-)connect through music with themselves and other people with even worse problems, put their talents to use in a work of art, and avoid getting entangled in the net of the past again by emigrating. Therefore, although these films are not impervious to the impact of mass migration on Ireland and the proverbial Irish obsession with the past, they suggest that the past must be shaken off at some point—and the sooner the better—or it will pull you down. Moreover, given that the weight of the past in Ireland is so great that it often makes this impossible to accomplish, *Once* and *Sing Street* suggest that the real tragedy for the aspiring Irish musician may not be leaving but staying, regardless of their real chances of making it in London, or the fact that, as *Begin Again* proposes, they may end up considering that the personal and/or artistic toll for *making it* is excessive and turn their back on the music industry. All in all, these films offer a *Brooklyn*-like, optimistic yet bold message to Ireland at a moment when first the post-Celtic Tiger slump and then the world economic crisis were again pushing thousands of Irish abroad.

Although Carney's male leads may also be said to engage with the tradition of colonial representation of the Irish and their diaspora as ineffectual, artistic child-men, the successful completion of each's hero's journey gives them adult agency and, therefore, ultimately keeps their projects away from the self-destructive impulse of their cinematic forebears in, for example, *The Commitments*, *The Van* (Frears, 1996), or *Eat the Peach* (Ormrod, 1986). Still, this journey is shown

to be impossible without a female companion who can shatter the false consciousness of their ordinary worlds, first, and then act as a source of inspiration, artistic partner, and close romantic friend. Nevertheless, this companion—a conventional film musical opposite with traits of the types of the mysterious, foreign saviouress and the resilient Irish female migrant of Irish popular culture—only comes close to also being a sexual partner in *Sing Street*.

While countless films, both musicals and non-musicals, suggest that physical touch, kissing, and intercourse are the most intimate forms of connection and shared pleasure, these films posit that the same intimacy and pleasure can be achieved through artistic collaboration, and that the mere expectation thereof can provide a form of solitary pleasure comparable to masturbation. Consequently, there may be no sex scenes in Carney's triptych, and only in *Sing Street* does the protagonist couple get to kiss, but the mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound of some numbers involving the protagonist couples seek to evoke those of cinematic kissing and/or sex scenes, especially in "Falling Slowly" and the reprise of "A Step You Can't Take Back." Otherwise, except for Dan and Gretta's night-time Manhattan walk, the joint numbers are generally staged as if they were conversations in which the characters express to each other—or, sometimes, to themselves—thoughts, feelings, and hopes that they are unable to express through verbal language, largely framed in MCUs, either singles or OTS two-shots, and edited using shot-reverse-shot. By contrast, the tracking two-shot, which dominates the night walk sequence, also dominates the non-musical segments, where the protagonist couples walk and talk in the street or at a tourist landmark, and occasionally sit in or on cafés, stoops, park benches, and public transportation.

Although the characters are musicians, the numbers are set in real locations, the camera is often handheld, and much of the music appears to have been recorded naturalistically on location, what ultimately lies beneath the facade of *cinéma vérité* is the Hollywood musical tradition. In the specific case of the numbers, it is not just that they move the plots forward or allow the narratives to occasionally do away with all pretension of realism and show an immigrant girl in her pyjamas singing in a dark, dodgy Dublin street over a largely non-diegetic musical accompaniment, a set of instruments coming to life and playing themselves on the stage of a NYC club, or a rehearsal for an amateur music video at a 1980s Irish school gym turning into a cinematic 1950s American prom. It is

also that even the most realistic numbers—the vast majority—are cued by video and audio dissolves that set them apart from the storyworld's "real" reality and signal that despite the appearance of reality being generally preserved, the action is being transported to an alternative, ideal "musical" reality.

The visual transition from reality to fantasy typically kicks off with the camera closing in on one of the protagonists to signify that it is assuming their POV and, therefore, justify whatever discrepancies there are between the number's mise-en-scène, cinematography, and especially sound design and regime of verisimilitude and those of the preceding scenes as expressions of the character's subjectivity. While the diegetic soundtrack crossfades between location and studio sound, often supported by one or more sound bridges, the visual transition will usually be completed through camera movement—especially (swish) pans and push-ins—and/or shot-reverse-shot editing. Then, once the film enters fantasy mode, professional sound can be obtained with amateur low-fi equipment and often in adverse acoustic conditions, non-diegetic vocals and instruments pop up in the middle of a live acoustic performance, and songs generally go from raw to final versions, pass from the diegetic to the music track and across scenes, or even break the synchrony with the images as they are played. In other words, in *Once*, *Begin Again*, and *Sing Street*, while there may be no orchestras coming up from the ground, the fantasy characteristic of the musical genre is very much alive and present—as a matter of fact, so much so that certain numbers even meta-narratively drive our attention to their own artificiality through sporadic third-person narrator shots, bursts of production sound, and alternation between amateur and professional footage.

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