

**The Celtic Tiger ‘Unplugged’: *DV* realism, liveness, and sonic authenticity in *Once* (2007)**

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**Abstract**

*Once (2007) is described by its director Carney as ‘a modern day musical’, eschewing the elaborately staged set-pieces associated with the film musical genre in favour of a more intimate style in which the songs arise ‘naturalistically’. Depicting the friendship between two musicians towards the end of ‘Celtic Tiger’-era Dublin, the film won critical acclaim and commercial success worldwide, confounding expectations of such a low-budget feature, shot cheaply on digital video. The commercial success of *Once* exemplifies the ‘rags-to-riches’ heroics of shoestring feature production in the millennial digital era. Yet the narrative of *Once* is paradoxically uneasy with digital technology and instead articulates what Philip Auslander (and others) term ‘rock authenticity’, fetishizing the ‘live’, the ‘lo-fi’ and the ‘acoustic’ in music. The overall approach to the sound of the film aspires towards ‘liveness’, as the use of location sound recording for the song sequences provides a particular textural quality that incorporates background noise and environmental reverberation, or ‘materializing sound indices’. This article uses analysis of the construction of sound space and sound-image relations in *Once* to demonstrate how this formal approach works with the narrative to communicate*

*texturally a particular notion of 'authenticity' and 'liveness' of the film. This will be supplemented with analysis of discourses of authenticity used in the film's publicity.*

**Keywords: Musicals, Indie, Digital Video, Liveness, Ireland**

*Once* (Carney, 2007), set in contemporary Dublin, captures a moment at the height of a still-booming Irish economy prior to the recent global crash. At this point, Ireland was at the crest of a wave of social and economic change. Following a century and a half of social conservatism, economic stagnation, mass unemployment and mass emigration, the country emerged in the mid-1990s into what has become known as the 'Celtic Tiger', featuring rapid economic growth, a weakened Catholic church, optimistic social liberalism, full employment, and, for the first time, significant levels of immigration. *Once* tells the story of a busker (nameless, but referred to in the credits as the Guy, played by Glen Hansard) who meets a musically gifted Czech immigrant (referred to in the credits as the Girl, and played by Markéta Irglová), and its rather slim plot involves them playing music together and gradually falling in love. The performance of music by the two central characters is a principal element of *Once*. In interview, its director John Carney categorizes it as 'a modern day musical', positing it as a response to the musical genre's perceived non-naturalistic tendencies. As Carney puts it: 'Musicals by their very nature are unreal and surreal'; in contrast: '*Once* is a naturalistic musical. There's nobody breaking into song and no orchestras that come up from the ground. It's very much what you see is what you get' (ClashMusic.com 2008).

Beyond how its songs are staged, a key element underpinning *Once*'s naturalism are notions of authenticity relating to its soundtrack as articulated by both Carney and Hansard, and with which this article is particularly concerned. For instance, in the interview, Hansard refers to the process of using the synchronized location-recorded sound of the musical performances in *Once*, rather than post-synchronized post-production sound, as 'recorded live' (Roberts 2007). Furthermore, describing his approach to shooting and recording the songs, Carney has explained in the interview that his 'number one rule' was to be 'really authentic and never have playback. If the guitar has a string missing, you should hear that that's missing. If the piano looks rickety and wrecked, it should sound that way' (Roberts 2007). It is striking how they effectively conflate this notion of musical authenticity with a privileging of synchronized location sound in film-making, implicitly positing post-production of songs in studio, along with performers lip-syncing, as less authentic and potentially at odds with the film's naturalism. However, Michel Chion asserts that:

there is no link in a sound film between the film-making process and the finished product. One can create the impression of direct sound in a post-synchronized film [...]; conversely, a film can seem post-synchronized [...] when in fact it has been recorded with direct sound. (2009: 221)

Referring to examples of films that predominantly use one method or another, Chion asserts that 'To the eye and ear it is impossible to tell the difference, unless we have the expertise of a specialist. We know the answer only from documents, such as accounts by

the directors and crew' (2009: 222). This suggests that, had Carney and Hansard not emphasized in press interviews that the songs in *Once* were 'recorded live', and had they instead recorded the songs in a studio and lip-synced along to them, spectators could not tell the difference – hence, the approach taken to the recording of sound in *Once* is merely ideological. It implies that sonic authenticity is merely in the eye, or rather, ear of the beholder.

This article will, first, locate Carney and Hansard's assertions regarding *Once*'s authenticity and naturalism within a broader context of Celtic Tiger-era Irish cinema, as well as low-budget film-making, before moving on to argue how its emphasis upon recording the songs 'live' rehashes the problematic aspects of liveness as ideology (Auslander 1999), and which is echoed within the narrative via the characters' uneasy relationship with technologies of mediation. Furthermore, this article seeks to explore and interrogate Chion's assertion that 'it is impossible to tell' whether or not a film uses direct or post-synchronized sound, given Carney and Hansard's emphasis upon the importance of location sound recording. Despite demonstrating the problem of using the term 'live' in a film sound context, I will ultimately show how more recent scholarship by Jacob Smith and Andy Birtwistle sheds light upon how *Once*'s approach to sound provides a key part of its appeal which would have been very difficult to achieve were the songs post-synchronized. The sonic texture of the songs in *Once* exudes a documentary-realist 'feel' and a particular 'energy' that is difficult to achieve in a studio recording. I wish to better understand these imprecise terms by using a sound theory framework that moves beyond cultural notions of liveness, supplementing attention to sound itself with analysis of *Once*'s sound-image relations. So, as well as taking seriously (though

problematizing), Carney and Hansard's claims regarding *Once*'s 'recorded-live' approach to the sound, in the second half of this article I will use Birtwistle's writings on the materiality of film sound (2010), as well as Smith's on sound, space, performance and mediation (2008), in order to understand what it is about the songs in *Once*, their sonic textures, and their audio-visual expression, that exudes liveness.

### **Ireland's Celtic Tiger and authenticity**

Miriam Mara describes *Once* as being in the cinematic tradition of the 'city symphony', emphasizing the importance of its urban setting to its narrative (2010). However, as noted by Martin McLoone, Irish cinema's previously uneasy relationship with the city has mirrored a general suspicion of the urban, which has characterized the cultural nationalism of post-independence Ireland: 'In Catholic nationalist ideology, the real Ireland was rural Ireland and the purest sense of Irish identity was to be found the further away one moved from the city' (2008: 43). In contrast, with the new-found confidence and economic prosperity of the previous decade and a half, a notable group of Irish films emerged utilizing contemporary Dublin settings as opposed to rural and village settings, and *Once* can be understood to be part of this trend.<sup>1</sup> McLoone cites examples of urban, Dublin-set, Celtic Tiger-era films including *Intermission* (Crowley, 2003), *About Adam* (Stembridge, 2001) and *Goldfish Memory* (Gill, 2003), which exude what he describes as 'hip hedonism':

They are Irish, certainly, but they epitomize a kind of transglobal 'cool.'

These films are much lighter in tone... and are driven by an infectious and

deliberately irreverent humour. The Dublin that is portrayed here is a city of luxurious apartments and well-appointed offices... conspicuous consumption... trendy restaurants, stylish coffee and wine bars, and modernist pubs. (2007: 212)

*Once* shares this irreverent humour and a certain lightness in tone, and its international box office success and the tremendous sales of its soundtrack album certainly suggest that it has a marketable ‘transglobal “cool”’. However, there are no signs of conspicuous consumption amongst the characters in *Once*, who eke out a living in casual and low-paid work. They exude poverty, albeit a vaguely bohemian, artistic one. The musicians in *Once* are all buskers or amateurs, performing their music in the street or in modest domestic spaces, at the fringes of the commercial sphere. In this way, while the characters depicted might be part of Celtic Tiger Ireland, the prosperity and materialism of it seem to pass them by. The disconnect between the flashy ‘hip hedonism’ of Celtic Tiger Ireland and the characters in *Once* reflects an unease regarding rapid social change, widely articulated by commentators in Ireland at the time. Not only was ‘[t]he claim that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer [...] another of the more commonly voiced criticisms of the Celtic Tiger’ (Fahey et al. 2007: 6) but also some commentators went so far as to assert that Ireland’s new-found wealth had beset it with a ‘spiritual emptiness’ amidst the ‘obscene parading of obscene wealth’ (Fahey et al. 2007: 2). While the film is hardly an explicit critique of conspicuous consumption, *Once*’s characters and narrative wrestle with the age old question of art versus commerce, foregrounded by the Celtic Tiger backdrop and the wealthy trappings of urban Dublin.

It is this context that helps situate *Once*'s quest for authenticity, of locale, of music, and of capturing on camera and microphone authentic musical performances, which is further emphasized by *Once*'s bid towards low-budget indie credibility. In his article on 'Ireland and the trope of authenticity', Colin Graham includes the following caveat – 'The authentic [...] is never obvious and is forever in need of the supplement of commentary' (2001: 60). While *Once*, an Irish film, may seek authenticity, it does not appear to seek authentic Irishness within the traditional, narrow, national cinema paradigm identified above by McLoone; however in interviews, Carney and Hansard have enthused that the low-budget, guerilla-style, 'back to basics' digital video shoot (€100,000 over two weeks [Indiewire, 2007]) allowed them to capture a 'snapshot' of Dublin 'now' (Roberts 2007). Much of the action of the film takes place in exterior locations that tend to be recognizable public spaces in Dublin's city centre, as well as to a lesser extent in the modest homes of the lead characters. The implication is that the 'real' Dublin is used as a backdrop to the fictionalized events depicted, almost in drama-documentary mode, and with Carney and Hansard crediting digital video technology as affording a technologically determined mode of representing the city. In this way, the production contexts of *Once* as described by the director and co-star, provide the 'supplement of commentary' required to authenticate its depiction of the city. Similarly, as a production, *Once* wears its low-budget guerrilla film-making heart on its sleeve. The use of hand-held DV to shoot the scenes adds to the sense of documenting the pro-filmic events unfolding spontaneously, effacing any sense that the performance to camera and microphone is a construct. Emphasizing this in interview, Carney makes a case for the authenticity of this style of film-making by stressing it was motivated by budgetary

constraints, even as he affirms its status as a style with stylistic connotations of realism: ‘You see that all the time. [Another film-maker] has money but he’s shaking the camera to make it look like he doesn’t. Actually, the reason the camera is shaking (in “Once”) was because we couldn’t afford tripods’ (Weisman 2007). In addition, Carney’s decision to cast Hansard and Irglová – ‘great singers who can half act’ rather than ‘great actors who can half sing’ (Roberts 2007) – further asserts the authentic musicianship of the performers.

### **Genre, realism and liveness**

*Once*’s sound is not technologically determined by its use of digital video for shooting, given that cameras do not record sound any more than microphones record images. However, the use of urban exterior and interior locations has an audible effect on the material quality of *Once*’s sound. Andy Birtwistle proposes that: ‘the notion of sonic materiality refers to the specific qualities, states, forms and structures of [...] sounds’, the aspects of which are ‘fundamentally interrelated. The quality of reverberation that contributes to the temporal profile of a sound is also inextricably linked with the physical space in which a sound event *takes place*’ (2010: 16, original emphasis). In addition, terms such as Jacob Smith’s ‘sonotope’ (2008: 245–46) and Michel Chion’s ‘materializing sound indices’ (or m.s.i.) (1994: 114), refer to the material interrelationship of sound and space to one another, and will be discussed later in more detail. A consideration of these terms will reveal that there are aspects of *Once*’s soundtrack that convey the relationship of the recording with the locations in which it

was recorded. But first I will consider notions of naturalism and realism in relation to the musical genre, taking a sound-focussed angle.

Jane Feuer declares the musical genre to be ‘the genre most of us think of as quintessentially Hollywood’ (1993: ix), and Carney posits *Once* as a naturalistic ‘small indie art-house’ reaction against Hollywood musicals, a genre he believes ‘rarely works’ (Browne 2007). He asserts that what he terms ‘the YouTube generation’ would not accept the premise of classical Hollywood musicals, and that he wanted *Once* to ‘use songs in a way that a modern audience would accept’, as well as to make a film in which the audience ‘would not know that they had watched a musical’ (Roberts 2007):

... it suddenly dawned on me that it's going to be hard for even a good singing actor to do quite what Glen is doing on screen, and wouldn't it be interesting if I just... it was DV and it was hand-held and naturalistic, and f\*ck the actors, let's not use actors in this one. Let's actually use real people [...] let's just strip it down really simple and go ahead and shoot it on a tiny budget. (Douglas 2007)

The extent to which Carney's premise truly breaks new ground is dubious given Hollywood's very own tradition of the ‘backstage’ musical. Feuer posits this as a ‘most persistent subgenre [which] has involved kids (or adults) “getting together and putting on a show”’ (1995: 441) and cites examples from even the early days of sound-on-film such as *The Jazz Singer* (Crosland, 1927), *Forty-Second Street* (Bacon, 1933) and *Twenty Million Sweethearts* (Enright, 1934). Indeed, Feuer suggests that the Hollywood

‘backstage’ musical could have addressed a scepticism in audiences long predating Carney’s ‘YouTube generation’: ‘fulfil[ing] a need for verisimilitude; perhaps the audience felt more comfortable viewing musical numbers within the context of a show than seeing fairy-tale queens and princes suddenly feeling a song coming on in their royal boudoir’ (1995: 441). Instead, how Carney relates *Once* to the wider musical genre is better understood as a practitioner-articulated low-budget contemporaneous response to contemporary Hollywood spectacle – a tendency defined by Lev Manovich as ‘*DV realism*’ that contrasts with Hollywood’s cinema of ‘digital special effects’ (Manovich 2002: 212).

Against this background of using what Carney describes as ‘real people’ and a ‘simple’ shoot, *Once*’s use of Glen Hansard as the main performer creates an intriguing conflation of Hansard’s own background as a musician and that of the character he plays. The songs Hansard performs as the Guy are either Hansard’s own songs or covers he has performed when busking. In the interview Hansard emphasizes his past experience as key to the authenticity of his performance in *Once*: ‘I busked from the age of 13 until I was 18. It was so easy to take out my guitar and do it again’ (Divola 2007). In the interview Carney asserts Hansard’s apparently unique suitability: ‘there’s nobody who’s going to be able to sell Glen’s songs the way he does in the performance’ (Douglas 2007). This conflation of performer and character is as integral to the perceived authenticity of *Once*’s performances as it is of singer/songwriters in rock and folk music generally, with Allan Moore arguing that this authenticity ‘is ascribed, not inscribed’. Within rock and folk music discourse, it is understood to be ‘a style of writing or performing, particularly anything associated with the practices of the singer/songwriter, where attributes of

intimacy [...] and immediacy (in the sense of unmediated forms of sound production) tend to connote authenticity' (Moore 2002: 210). Hence, *Once*'s prioritization of the use of synchronized location-recorded sound, and with Hansard describing the songs as 'recorded live', conflates production sound approaches in film-making with notions of 'unmediated forms of sound production' that connote authenticity in rock music. There is an implicit sense that the approach taken to *Once*'s sound follows on from the rationale behind its casting (of a 'real' singer/songwriter and busker) and its 'simple' approach to shooting.

However, it must be noted that this is merely one of many competing discourses of authenticity. Moore identifies multiple contrasting discourses of authenticity ascribed to music including (with reference to Lawrence Grossberg [1993: 203–06]) 'authentic inauthenticity': 'showing honesty in the acceptance of cynical self-knowledge' (2002: 214). Much as *Once*'s emphasis on location recorded sync sound is driven by an impetus to keep mediation to a minimum, conversely, other instances of musical performance in cinema can strive for 'authentic inauthenticity' by drawing attention to the construct of synchronization. The ideological implications of cinema's inherent material split between sound and image – and the notion that lip-sync effaces it – is explored by David Laderman in relation to discourses of authenticity in music. Writing specifically about punk musicals, such as *Jubilee* (Jarman, 1977), Laderman notes the use of a technique he terms (s)lip-sync, in which a singer slips out of sync with their vocal. This operates as a strategy to subvert the performance by drawing attention to the audio-visual construct – 'the performer exceeds the performance spectacle by disengaging' (2008: 272).

In short, neither the use nor the eschewal of synchronized location recorded sound are inherently understood as sonic authenticity, and depends upon the wider contexts of particular musical subcultures, e.g. punk authenticity is not the same as rock or folk authenticity. Furthermore, even within the context of film-making, there is not a straightforward definition of realism of the soundtrack, and the use of direct sound does not necessarily make a film sound more 'real'. Writing on sound in wildlife documentary, Leo Murray argues that realism in the film soundtrack is '...is the product of creative choice, like any other in film-making or documentary making' (2010: 132):

Film-makers in drama are not routinely bound by the need to present an absolutely truthful soundtrack and image track, though they may well strive for a realistic portrayal. For both film-maker and audience, the authenticity of the soundtrack is not a prime concern. Instead 'disguised artifice' is the norm, where the soundtrack is manipulated to suit the needs of the story whilst remaining concealed for the most part. (2010: 133)

Hence, *Once*'s efforts towards authenticity of the soundtrack can be understood to be motivated partly by cultural notions of mediation rather than cinematic conventions of realism.

Philip Auslander's analysis of 'liveness' is helpful as a means of comprehending how *Once* uses sync location-recorded sound in a bid towards musical authenticity. The musicians in *Once* play acoustic, unamplified instruments in ad hoc venues such as the street, at house parties and (in one scene) a piano shop. Auslander designates live

performance and acoustic instruments as ‘signs of the real’ within a discourse of ‘rock authenticity’ (1999: 98), and describes this musical ‘authenticity’ as both ‘an ideological concept’, as well as an ‘essentialist’ concept to the music fan – music is either authentic or it is not. It is also a romantic concept, in which the ‘mythology of self-expression’ is central (1999: 70). Glen Hansard’s choice of terminology – ‘recorded live’ – evokes rock notions of ‘liveness’ and its accompanying discourse of authenticity in a film sound context. For Carney, casting musicians who can actually play their instruments, and recording their performances on location, are central to his quest to create an ‘authentic’ musical. According to Auslander, the obsession with live performance is a function of the ubiquity of media technology, wherein video is our primary experience of music, and indeed *Once* itself embodies this paradox – the ‘live’ performance events, depicted in this film, are a recording. This parallels the television programme *MTV Unplugged* (1989) and its accompanying ‘live’ albums, which ‘simulates the polarities that define rock ideology, even as the program is itself symptomatic of the crisis in that same ideology’ (Auslander 1999: 92).

The privileging of sync location sound as ‘unity’ of sound and image is evident from the outset. The very first scene involves the Guy busking in Dublin’s bustling city centre, singing and strumming on acoustic guitar a cover of Van Morrison’s ‘And the Healing Has Begun’. He is framed so that we see his whole body, from the front, with his surroundings fully visible, establishing the setting and his relationship to it. The sound of his voice and his guitar playing is synchronized and unified with the image of him singing and playing – the spectator can see and hear that it is the Guy (or Hansard) who is singing the song and playing the guitar. Most of the songs are shot in this way, avoiding

any noticeable separation of song from visual performance (e.g., as non-diegetic music) as well as avoiding any audible post-synchronization of sound and image. There are a few exceptions to this approach, but these exceptions actually reinforce the privileging of sync location sound by virtue of their very exceptionality. One such exception is where the Girl walks down the street at night, having visited the corner shop to buy batteries for her Discman. Through headphones, she listens to an instrumental track recorded by the Guy, and sings along with lyrics she composed herself. This is audibly post-synchronized as her vocals sound studio-recorded and ‘clean’ (i.e. there is no audible noise from her surroundings or her body as she walks); however this is justified by the interiority of this moment, along with the second order of mediation of the instrumental track played through headphones. Moreover, the fact that this exception occurs quite late in the narrative means that *Once*’s ‘norm’ for the mediation of the songs, ‘recorded live’, has already been well established as such. Hansard himself comments that this song, as the only one not ‘recorded live’ is ‘the only bit where I guess reality is suspended a little bit’ (Roberts 2007), implying that he feels that direct sound has a stronger link with ‘reality’.

This avoidance of studio-recorded music is echoed by a discomfort with recording technology demonstrated within the narrative. A major plot point in the final act involves the Girl helping the Guy finance a professional recording of his music, negotiating a weekend in a studio with a professional engineer to record an album-length demo, and rounding up other buskers to be backing musicians. The scenes depicting the recording sessions show the musicians rehearsing and playing as live in the studio, with the music heard diegetically. In addition, two of the songs are used non-diegetically over montage sequences that condense the time spent recording the album over the weekend and a trip

in the studio engineer's car for the 'car test', in which they check that the recorded album sounds satisfactory over a humble car stereo (as an aside, it is implied that the two songs we hear are products of the recording session; once again, this is a second order of mediation within the narrative that motivates and justifies the use of non-diegetic music within the 'recorded live' scheme). But particularly telling is a scene that depicts the musicians as they prepare for the recording session, appearing quite uncomfortable in contrast with their ease of performing in the street or in domestic spaces. The studio engineer says he needs to 'check the drums', to which the drummer replies 'I check them every day, they're fine'. The humour of this verbal exchange centres upon the musicians' lack of familiarity and discomfort with the technology of recording – the musicians don't speak the language of the recording studio. They only know how to play live, and the world of the recording studio is unfamiliar and inaccessible.

### **Sonic authenticity, the sonotope and performer fragility**

*Once*'s urban setting amidst a milieu of buskers make spaces such as the street important sites of musical performance, and the use of lightweight DV cameras affords a sense of intimacy and mobility in the way the scenes are shot. Smith's term 'sonotope', describing the configuration of sound and space in relation to one another (2008: 245–46), is pertinent to an analysis of sound, performance and space in *Once*: 'an attention to sonotope can direct our attention to the way in which voices indicate space and frame performance' (2008: 246). The second song performed, entitled 'Say It To Me Now', is the Guy's/Hansard's own song, and is shot at night, in contrast to the opening scene. The

backdrop is an empty Grafton Street with all the shops closed, and the lack of a visible or audible audience creates a sense of his performance having a ‘purity’ untainted by commercialism. The use of the song in this scene demonstrates a basic example of what Carney means by ‘modern day musical’. By having the character busk his song, the performance is given a setting recognizable from everyday life, in which it would be perfectly ‘natural’ for a person to sing a song. The performance incorporates the natural reverberation and acoustics of the street – which is particularly apparent on the vocals – as well as including low-level background traffic noise and distant chatter. This plants the performance firmly in the street setting, with the street’s acoustics contributing m.s.i., which ‘pull the scene towards the material and the concrete’ (Chion 1994: 114). The sonotope as defined by Smith incorporates Chion’s concept of m.s.i., but in addition it clarifies how the relationship between space and performance is reciprocal: ‘Not only does the sound we hear include information on the space in which it is emitted or recorded (i.e. reverb, timbre etc.), but also the space can encourage a particular type of vocal performance’ (Smith 2008: 245–46).

Hansard’s vocal, as well as being inflected by the acoustics of the street, strives to fill the wide empty chasm of the street as much as possible, delivering a sense of passion and urgency. The lyrics of the final verse (‘Cause this is what you’ve waited for/A chance to even up the score [...] So if you have something to say/Say it to me now’) are half-sung, half screamed. In this respect, the sonotope operates within discourses of rock authenticity – this type of performance has precedent in much rock music. In Smith’s discussion of John Lennon’s performance of the song ‘Mother’ from the *Plastic Ono Band* album, he links the rasping, painful style of singing specifically to Lennon’s

dabbling in primal scream therapy as well as more broadly to notions of self-expression: ‘The rasp indicates an emotional truth and catharsis meant to unify a divided self’ (Smith 2008: 161). This scream of (white) singers, beyond Lennon, incorporating punk, grunge and some forms of rock, has continued to ‘signify the revelation of inner truth or cathartic release’ (Smith 2008: 162). Hansard’s half-screamed vocals can be read in this context as a cry of authentic ‘pure’ artistic expression, performed in a liminal space of an empty shopping street, in which the performer is surrounded by the dormant trappings of the commercial world, yet estranged from them. Here, Hansard and the Guy’s creativity and ‘self’-expression are conflated into one, given that the Guy tells the girl (later revealed to have witnessed the performance) that he wrote the song himself (whereas the soundtrack album credits the composition to Hansard). He explains that he plays covers during the day and his ‘own’ songs at night because during the day ‘people want to hear songs they know’, further emphasizing that particular performance’s sincerity and artistic purity.

The fragility of the live performance frame, and the vulnerability of the performer ‘caught’ on camera (and microphone) is also depicted. Jacob Smith borrows from Erving Goffman the concept of ‘flooding out’ to describe a situation in which a performer (or a person acting within a social framework), loses control of the performance situation, reacting with laughter, anger or tears:

the central feature of a variety of phonograph records, radio and television broadcasts, and amateur recordings is the performer’s loss of control [...] These media texts are structured in such a way as to highlight a moment where the performer loses his or her composure and vocally floods out,

shattering the performance frame and thereby offering a tantalizing suggestion of authentic and spontaneous expression. (2008: 6)

‘Flooding out’ occurs in the very first scene of *Once*, during the Guy’s performance of the Van Morrison song. He is distracted by an over-enthusiastic junkie who he suspects is interested in the money collected in his guitar case, but attempts to maintain his composure as he sings and plays. However, he briefly breaks off from his song with a glance at the junkie and a hostile snarl of ‘Don’t fuckin’ –’. As he resumes the song, maintaining eye-contact, he halts his performance again (including the guitar strumming), with an angrier threat of ‘I swear to God you fuckin’ go near that I’m goin’ after you – right?’. He resumes playing, but the tension between him and the junkie culminates in the junkie abruptly grabbing his guitar case and running away with it, with the Guy in rapid pursuit. The humour of this scene works to highlight the vulnerability of the ‘live’ performer in the manner Smith outlines (2008: 6).

A similar moment takes place near the end of *Once*, this time with the emphasis on pathos rather than humour. With the Guy and Girl alone in the studio, the Girl plays a melancholy piano and vocal composition of her own which she originally wrote for her husband. Her playing becomes increasingly halted and syncopated and her voice starts to crack. Suddenly, she breaks off completely from playing and drops her face into her hands, sobbing. Her act of ‘flooding out’ appears to demonstrate the sincerity, spontaneity and authenticity of the performance. Throughout *Once* these moments are further emphasized sonically by the use of sync location sound, replete with m.s.i., which communicate sonically a moment of ‘live’ performance ‘unadulterated’ by interventions

into the soundtrack such as studio mixing and editing. Yet paradoxically, these moments can only ever *simulate* liveness, given their status as mediated performance events. The emphasis placed upon spontaneity, sincerity and fragility can therefore be seen as compensatory and as expressing an anxiety regarding mediation of musical performance.

### **The materiality of location-recorded sound**

Throughout *Once*, the exterior performances compete sonically with a wash of background city sounds. In addition, the register of performance tends to compete with and drown out these sounds, and with this background ‘noise’ still audible, as Andy Birtwistle has observed, the sound of the performed voice or music exhibits a ‘sonic signature’ that characterizes the circumstances in which it is recorded (2010: 91). Beyond Chion’s m.s.i., this noise infects both the singing and spoken voice to give them their particular material quality. This flux of urban noise, though exhibited in a screen-centred 2.0 mix, implies the dynamism of the urban environment, as does the mobile, spontaneous hand-held camera with its unpredictable, shaky movement. While 5.1 surround sound might be the Hollywood standard, *Once* eschews this for more screen-centred 2.0 stereo, and the sense of the music permeating the wider three dimensions of the pro-filmic space is communicated through this dynamic flux of noisy sound, as well as through the use of cutaways and moving hand-held shots of previously off-screen listeners. This visual technique can be observed during a scene in which the Guy and the Girl first play together in a piano shop (incidentally, the song ‘Falling Slowly’ that went

on to win an Academy Award). As the song reaches its climactic instrumental section, the hand-held camera ‘dollies’<sup>2</sup> slowly back and away from the musicians, then cuts to a ‘dolly’ slowly moving forward to the piano shop proprietor, smiling and appearing to enjoy the music. Similarly, during a scene on a bus, a cutaway is used to reveal that an elderly passenger has overheard a song played by the Guy that initially appeared only to be heard by the Girl.

In addition, quieter interior spaces become intimate retreats for quieter registers of performance in *Once*. An example of this occurs in the aforementioned studio scene in which the Girl performs her own piano and vocal composition. Just before she starts to play, the Guy and the Girl speak to each other in voices mediated in a manner that emphasize not only the quietness of the environment but also a rare moment of shared intimacy between them. There is virtually no audible background sound, given the acoustically ‘dead’ studio/rehearsal room environment, and the Guy and the Girl are oddly hushed and respectful of this quiet atmosphere. They whisper to each other, but their whispers are closely miked and reproduced in quite loud detail. In ‘The proxemics of the mediated voice’, Arnt Maasø argues that:

many movies, especially mainstream Hollywood movies display a much more personal vocal register than in most other genres. The vocal distance becomes much more personal than what would be possible in similar surroundings in (nonmediated) interpersonal communication. Much of this is presumably due to great control over the recording situation, and what I suspect is an underlying ideology (or tradition) of vocal intimacy. (2008: 45–46)

However, in *Once*, this rare moment of vocal intimacy is afforded by the characters' presence in the soundproofed confines of a recording studio; therefore, we are conscious that the quietness allowing this intimacy is mediated via acoustic technology. It contrasts with other scenes shot in noisier locations in which voices – though intelligibly recorded and mixed – compete with background noise and the m.s.i. of reflected sound. This works to emphasize the sense conveyed throughout *Once* of an apparent lack of control of external factors influencing what we here in the soundtrack – the use of location-recorded sync sound in an urban environment means that noise can always intrude upon the characters, because we are hearing 'live' recordings of 'spontaneous' events. The only scene that allows them to speak so quietly, softly and intimately to each other, yet be intelligible, takes place in a recording studio; thus the setting provides narrative justification for the acoustic quality of this dialogue.

## **Conclusion**

The examples above show how *Once*'s use of direct sound strives towards conveying a minimally mediated musical performance. While I have demonstrated that this approach is problematic because it uncomfortably transposes to a film sound situation cultural notions prevalent in rock music regarding liveness, I have also explored the spatial and material characteristics of *Once*'s 'live' sound to show that it is inaccurate to dismiss these efforts completely. An attention to *Once*'s 'sonic signature' (Birtwistle 2010) and its songs' 'sonotope' (Smith 2008) convey subtle but important qualities that mark out its use of synchronized location sound, qualities that are difficult to achieve were the songs

post-synchronized, and communicating sonic authenticity. It is interesting to note at this point that the recently released film musical *Les Misérables* (Hooper, 2012) has, like *Once*, used its unusual approach to production sound as a key element of its publicity, given the decision to have the cast sing ‘live’ rather than using overdubbing as industry standard. The award-winning sound mixer for *Les Misérables*, Simon Hayes, has described the ‘live’ singing as giving ‘a more real and truthful performance’ (Shapiro 2012), which suggests continuity with practitioner discourses regarding sound in *Once* six years earlier. However, there are some major differences between the sound of the two films. *Les Miserables*, in contrast with *Once*, uses sets and sound stages rather than location shooting, as well as backing music fed to the actors via concealed headphones, so that this backing music would not interfere with the recording of their vocals; in short, completely isolating the vocal performances from intrusive background noise (Shapiro 2012). Hence, while the vocals were recorded ‘live’ on set and not post-synchronized, just as much control was exerted upon capturing a noiseless recording as would in a studio, in order to render the recordings usable for industry-standard post-production mixing and editing. In contrast, the use of location-recorded sound in *Once* makes the background noise of the ‘real’ Dublin a key feature of its soundtrack, factoring in location noise as an element of the ‘liveness’ of its sound. While practitioner discourses surrounding *Les Misérables* certainly echo those of practitioners quoted elsewhere in this article, regarding ‘truth’, ‘real’-ness and ‘live’ sound, sound in *Les Misérables* can be understood to be ‘hi-fi’ live, in contrast to *Once*’s ‘lo-fi’ live.

Meanwhile, having been re-adapted for Broadway as a stage musical, with a new cast and theatrical director, this low-budget DV-shot feature film has moved into a yet

another cultural realm. Most notably, its adaptation to a live performance mode has further consolidated the emphasis placed upon authenticity, musicianship and liveness articulated earlier by the director and performers in publicity surrounding the film. Despite the adaptation's use of a new cast, the Broadway musical's director John Tiffany has asserted in a publicity interview that:

It was very much about trying to harness the honesty and the purity of the film, yet find a theatrical language [...] It's a piece of theatre about people creating music, and so, to my mind, the audience needed to see that music being created in front of them. (*Once the Musical* 2013)

This desire to include demonstrative evidence of authentic musicianship performed onstage chimes with Carney's approach to the filming of musicians in the film, problematized however by the casting of new performers in the stage version. As if anticipating potential criticism in this regard, the Broadway publicity video includes interview footage of Hansard and Irglová giving the Broadway adaptation their blessing (*Once the Musical* 2013). As *Once* is adapted from one medium to another, discourses of liveness and performance authenticity continue to follow it around, re-emerging in publicity interviews, suggesting that the slippery notion of liveness in a mediated culture is as prominent as ever.

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> As an urban-set, popular music focussed, Irish feature film, *Once* has a key precedent in Alan Parker’s *The Commitments* (1991) and a noteworthy recent successor in the Belfast-set *Good Vibrations* (Barros D’Sa and Leyburn, 2012). Given the former’s status as a literary adaptation, much scholarly interest has focussed upon the source material of Roddy Doyle’s novel and its status (dubious or otherwise) as a postcolonial text (e.g. McGonigle 2005; Taylor 2008), with little deep analysis of the film and its particular musical qualities, although Smyth (2005) offers a welcome popular music studies approach. More discussion of this set of films from a popular music studies and/or soundtrack studies angle would be welcome, perhaps exploring questions concerning the status of youth, leisure and music in

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contemporary Ireland and the implications of these films' reception and commercial success abroad; however such in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>2</sup> I have used quotation marks here because, while the direction of movement described is a dolly, the shot is handheld, so does not actually use a dolly.