

STUDY GUIDE FOR THE FILM **ONCE**

Ireland 2008, written and directed by John Carey

Questions for the class are organized in two categories: before viewing (bv) and after viewing (av)

Synopsis

Written and directed by John Carey, **ONCE** is a musical which neither looks nor sounds like one. The film begins with a rather poor looking busker or street musician playing his guitar on a high street in Dublin, singing the tender song "And the Healing Has Begun". Although it's not easy being a busker and the weather is quite chilly, the music lulls us into a rather nice romantic moment. But the world is also hard. An addict tries to run off with all of the busker's hard-earned money. After catching him, the busker reluctantly gives the addict a fiver. Back on the high street, it's now cold, lonely and dark and the busker is singing the song "Say It to Me Now". Touched by his music, a young Eastern European woman gives him 10 cents. "Who did you write the song for?" she pointedly asks. "No one", he answers evasively. "Hmm...I'm telling you. You play this marvellous song to her, you'll get her back!". "I don't want her back!" he retorts rather unconvincingly. The tone is now set for the rest of the film.

Next day she brings him her broken Hoover (a British vacuum cleaner) so he can fix it. With only his guitar at hand, however, he can't. Together, they walk down the street to a music shop, he with his guitar on his back and she dragging her broken Hoover behind her. Sitting at the piano, she plays a beautiful Mendelssohn piece without words. Speechless, he gets out his guitar, shows her his notes and they both start to play and sing "Falling Slowly" (winner of the Oscar for best original song in 2008). Falling slowly for her indeed, he asks her to stay the night with him at his place. Shocked, she says "Fuck this!" and walks out. Is their relationship going to end even before it has begun?

Meeting her again on the street while she is selling flowers, you can see how sorry he feels. "I'm so lonely and you're so gorgeous. I just fucked up" he nervously stutters. "It won't happen again". After a long moment, she slowly smiles. Reaching out with her hand he quickly gives her his promised CD with his music on it and a CD player. Now it's her turn to show him her "responsibilities". She invites him to her small apartment, where she lives with her baby daughter and her mother, who speaks only Czech. Sitting on the steps outside after dinner, he asks her if she would like to do the lyrics to one of his songs on the CD he is having difficulty with. Jumping to the chance, she quickly writes the lyrics on her bed. The result is "If You Want Me", which she sings while walking down the street in her slippers at night. But whose heart does he really want?

Strumming his guitar at home, we see him working on his song "Lies", which is about his ex-girlfriend who went off to London. Webcam images of earlier happier times fill the screen as he gives an emotional performance of his song. His mind is now made up. "I'm going to London" he tells the girl, who is again selling flowers on the street. But before he goes, he wants to do a professional recording of some of his songs in a studio. "Would you like to come along?" he tentatively asks. "You mean sing and play? I'd love to!" she happily answers. After recruiting a trio of musicians, they practice together and finally go to the studio.

Their recording begins with the powerful song “When Your Mind’s Made Up”. Although there is a good atmosphere, the recording session is exhausting. During a small break, the girl finds a piano and starts playing and singing her own sad song “The Hill”, a composition she wrote for her husband. Deeply moved, he asks her to come with him to London. “Can I bring my mother?” she asks. They look into each other’s eyes. Smile. But the romantic answer doesn’t come. And so they go back to work and finish the recording, which sounds fabulous.

In the final sequence of the film, we see him carrying a full backpack and guitar on his shoulders. He desperately wants to see the girl one more time and say goodbye. But where is she? Looking for her in the music shop, he sees again the piano they used when they first started playing music together. We begin to hear the song “Falling Slowly” once again as he turns to the shop assistant. In the next scene we see the piano being delivered to the girl, who is overjoyed. The song continues as we now see him at the airport slowly walking to the departure gate, wearing a sad smile. The last shot is of her playing the new piano in her apartment, while her husband is cuddling her daughter in the background. The screen now fades into black as we hear the remaining verses of the song. With the final film credits comes quite unexpectedly the very last song of the film - “Once”. There we hear the line “Once I knew where to look for you”...

For John Carey, filming is very much like music. Thus, far from needing a long and very detailed script like so many other film directors would prefer, he generally favours a short script, for improvisation and the creation of a certain mood are more important to him than narration. This is precisely what we see in the film **Once**. Carey beautifully blends outstanding musical performances with real-life scenes to create a plot which functions more on the level of expressing a feeling than that of telling a story. In this endeavour he was greatly assisted by the two stars in the film. The 30-something unnamed Dublin busker (listed in the film credits simply as the “Guy”) is played by Glen Hansard, widely known lead singer and songwriter of the popular Irish Indie rock band “The Frames”. The young unnamed Czech immigrant woman (listed in the credits simply as the “Girl”) is wonderfully played by Markéta Irglová.

Questions:

bv: Is music important in a film? Why? What role does music sometimes play in a film? Does anyone listen to film soundtracks?

John Carey both wrote the script and directed the film. He also was a member in a professional music band. Why is this normally a good thing when making a music movie?

Are buskers sometimes good musicians? Do they do other jobs?

**av: Is it a romantic film? Does the film have a happy ending?
How would you describe their relationship?**

Special features of ONCE

The music

It is important to note that as a musical the film **Once** has a number of very unusual features. Firstly, this film exhibits a degree of realism rarely found in musicals. It is quite unlike the classical Hollywood musical productions of the 30s, 40s and 50s (such as the huge studio musicals **DADDY LONG LEGS**, **SINGING IN THE RAIN** or **CAROUSEL**), which were dominated by an element of fantasy. Moreover, with no famous stars listed among its cast, this film is also radically different from such musicals as **WEST SIDE STORY** or **CABARET** from the 60s and 70s, for although now reflecting harsher social realities, these works were still nevertheless conceived primarily as Hollywood star productions (i.e. Natalie Wood with the music from Leonard Bernstein in **WEST SIDE STORY** or Lisa Minnelli in **CABARET**). All these musicals and their stars are, however, largely unknown among young people today.

It is therefore more fruitful to invite young people to draw a comparison between the film **Once** and music videos. Here the differences become very clear. When Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová perform their scenes in front of the camera, there is never any play back! This is inconceivable in music videos. In other words, they do not act their singing, they really sing. Each take is a real musical performance. Nor do we see any massive stage lighting and incredulous post-production special effects. For all these reasons, the film - unlike music videos - looks and sounds real. This makes the film very endearing.

The acting

Secondly, what also makes **Once** a highly unusual film is the special fact that the two main characters in the film are played by non-actors: that is to say, by two people who have never acted in front of a camera before. Under any circumstances, this would be a risky undertaking. The film director John Carey takes this courageous step. For when having to choose between having two professional actors, who can half sing or having two professional singers, who can half act, he chooses the latter. While this was not his original intention, the two non-actors Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová deliver very remarkable and moving performances, greatly adding to the realism of the film.

Moreover, it should be added, that Carey's decision to have the two leading characters played by non-actors only works because both people were equally inexperienced in front of the camera. Had only one of them been a professional and the other one not, their joint performances would have been very uneven. The professional would constantly have felt under-challenged during the shooting of the film, while the other would have always felt insecure. By having both main characters played by non-actors who are equally inexperienced, this problem is very cleverly avoided. In this way both can feel equally "relaxed" in front of each other and therefore in front of the camera

The story

Thirdly, **Once** is a film essentially about friendship, and possibly love, between a man and a woman - and about the wonderful music they make together. While this may sound like a classical love story, John Carey cleverly ensures that the expected romance never quite happens. Indeed, throughout the film, the guy and the girl never even kiss! This is quite extraordinary.

Yet, this is precisely what makes **Once** such a tender film. The two develop a relationship often expressed through music. But is their relationship one of friendship or of love? Or is it both? Which way will their relationship go? We are left wondering and uncertain, just like the characters in the film. There is, for example, an early scene where he asks the girl to spend the night with him at his place, looking at her with his sad lonely eyes. She, however, looking straight at him, says “Fuck this!” and leaves. Later on, towards the end of the film, he invites her again to his place. Feeling hesitant, she at first refuses, saying “We would just hanky-panky”. “Hanky-panky?” he asks smilingly. “Yeah, hanky-panky...that would be nice” as she smiles back. Still plagued by doubts, she at last promises to come over, but in the end leaves him waiting. In the final sequence of the film we see the guy walking down the departure lounge to catch his plane smiling to himself followed subsequently by the girl sitting at her new piano looking plaintively out her front window. The long awaited romantic kiss never comes.

Questions:

bv: What is a musical? Is a musical just a long music video?

What is a traditional “boy-meets-girl” story? Give examples.

av: Did anyone notice that the two main characters are non-actors? What makes them so believable?

Is the guy a hypocrite because he desires the girl as well as wants to go back and be with his ex-girlfriend?

What does the girl want? Why do they never kiss?

The Dramatic Structure of the Film

In large part, the dramatic structure of the film **Once** is to be found in the music. The songs literally give the film its distinct dramatic rhythm. This is accomplished by placing the songs in a very careful order. This is clearly what John Carey does. He introduces the songs in such a way that each new scene adds to the dramatic tempo of the film, thereby creating a rhythmic mood which not only moves us emotionally, but also moves the story along as well.

Getting to know each other

This is best illustrated by taking a look at the songs and the order of their appearance in the film (see list below). The film begins with a busker singing the song “And the Healing Has Begun”. This is followed by the song “Say It To Me Now”. Despite being filmed in a central Dublin pedestrian zone, in both scenes the guy appears essentially alone - like an outsider. It is after this second song that he first meets the girl - essentially another outsider. The dramatic tempo of the film first really begins to quicken when the guy and the girl are both in the music shop. The scene starts with the girl playing a touching piano piece by Mendelssohn. Very moved by the music, sparks really begin to fly when the two perform together the song “Falling Slowly”, making even the shop assistant smile with its wonderful crescendo.

Reflection

Later on in the film, we see the girl writing and singing the lyrics to the song “If You Want Me”, which is about her tender feelings for the guy.

This is directly followed by a scene, where the guy is working on the lyrics to his song "Lies", which expresses his painful yearning for his ex-girlfriend in London. Unlike in the music shop, however, in both these scenes the girl and guy are now alone. They still give great performances, but now ones which are very intimate.

Exuberance

The dramatic rhythm of the film again bursts forward in the studio scene, where the newly-formed band gives a powerful performance of the song "When Your Mind's Made Up". This is quickly followed by the joyful song "Fallen From The Sky". In contrast to the earlier more personal moments in the film, these studio scenes are ones of sheer exuberance. There is one touching moment, when the girl performs the song "The Hill" in the studio. As a slow song, it also slows down the dramatic tempo of the film for a moment. This is, however, quickly picked up again when the song "When Your Mind's Made Up" is heard once again during the subsequent beach scene.

Farewell

In the final sequence of the film, we see the guy desperately looking for the girl, but she is nowhere to be found. Still hoping to see her, he even goes back to the music shop. But there he doesn't see her. He sees the piano. It's the same piano they used when they first started playing music together. Like a memory, we now begin to hear the opening lines of the song "Falling Slowly" once again. This time around, however, the song does not bring the two strangers together. Indeed, hearing the song a second time merely highlights the sadness and sense of loss the two now feel. In the end, the girl gets the piano, while the guy smiles sadly as he walks to the plane. The screen fades into black as the song continues. The list of film credits now appear. The song "Falling Slowly" finally ends as the credits continue on the dark screen. This darkness is further reinforced by the very last song and rather sad song "Once". On this rather sad note, the film ends. While it is not a traditional happy ending, nor can we honestly say it is an unhappy ending. It is something in-between. That is what makes this film so unusual and refreshing.

Boy-meets-girl

One final remark is still worth making when regarding the dramatic structure of the film **Once**. John Carey is able to heighten the drama between the two main characters in the film by giving their relationship an interesting twist. While in a typical boy-meets-girl movie, the man always plays the mature dynamic role and the girl is always young, beautiful and a little bit naive, in this film it's the other way around. The 30-something busker is the one who is naive and indecisive, while the much younger immigrant Czech woman is the one who plays the more mature and dynamic role. Although she is only around 20, she is the one who seems to have so much more life experience than he has. She is the one who essentially wakes him up, leading him to finally "make up his mind" and go and get his ex-girlfriend back again. This is precisely what happens in the film. In this sense, she is the dynamic element in their friendship, moving things forward. By avoiding standard film clichés, Carey makes a film which looks modern. In this way he also gives their relationship a special dramatic touch.

Questions:

- bv:** Can an insignificant event or occurrence in our lives become dramatic? What makes a particular moment dramatic? What makes it exciting? Why are they important in a film?
How would you make a dramatic moment in a musical? What role should the music play?
What is a dramatic turn in a film? Give an example
- av:** What is the story of the film? How is the story told? Is it shown or heard?
What are the strengths and weaknesses of the two main characters?
When are they the emotionally closest and when are they the most emotionally separate? How is this shown in the film?

The Role of the Music

Music plays an over-riding role in the film **Once**. This is highlighted by the fact that practically all the songs were specifically written for the film. They were all written by Glen Hansard, lead singer and songwriter of the Irish band "The Frames", and Markéta Irglová, the two very same people who actually play the two main characters in the film. Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová literally play their roles with their music! That is to say, they play their roles and play their music as if they were one. This of course gives the film an outstanding authenticity and realism rarely seen in cinema.

Moreover, approximately sixty percent of the film is people playing music! This is quite remarkable. Simply from the point of view of timing, this is very difficult to film. So much music in a gig or rock concert is fine, because you can dance, talk and move around. But having so much music on the screen is quite a different matter. Now the audience is all sitting in their cinema seats. There is no dancing, talking and moving around like in a live concert. John Carey, who was himself a member of Glen Hansard's band "The Frames", is very aware of this. So how does Carey solve the problem of having all the songs heard in their full length - which occupies sixty percent of the film - without making audience restless and bored?

John Carey has a quite simple but elegant solution to this problem. He lets the music begin in one scene and then overlap into the subsequent scenes. That is, the music begins in one scene and then continues directly into the following scenes without interruption. An example of this overlapping technique can be both seen and heard in the early bedroom scene where the guy is singing the song "All The Way Down". We see him on the screen lying on his bed, sadly singing and playing his guitar. If this image were to last the whole length of the song, it would be rather boring for the audience. So after about 20 seconds, there is a cut - but we still hear the song! This continuity softens the cut. We see him trying to phone someone up, but there is only the answering machine. He sadly hangs up. Then we see him soulfully looking at a photograph of a girl next to his bed. Then we are back again to the original scene with him playing his guitar on the bed, sadly singing. Then there is a rather sharp cut to the next scene where we see the guy leaving his father's Hoover repair shop carrying his guitar while we hear the line "You have broken me...all the way down". The voices of him and his father as well as other background noises now begin mingle with the sounds of the music. This again softens the cut.

Finally we see him playing music in the street but we now hear only the final verses of the song “All The Way Down”. The song softly ends as we now begin to hear the bustle of the street. The girl approaches the guy with her Hoover in hand and says “Hello”. Clearly, this whole film sequence is very carefully put together. Yet, while the editing here is superb, it is essentially the music which makes us feel that this series of scenes is one single dramatic moment.

John Carey uses this overlapping technique repeatedly in the film. In this way the songs are all heard in their full length, giving an important dramatic structure to the whole film.

Questions:

bv: Most music videos have a simple way of showing the music. Normally it's a band playing their hit directly in front of a camera. How many different ways can you imagine there are to film a band making music? Music clearly has a rhythm. Can a film have a rhythm too? Give an example.

What does it mean, when we say some scenes are “fast” and others are “slow”? What makes them “fast” and “slow”?

av: Did you like the music? Did you have any favourite songs?

Did the music fit the scenes? How did they fit?

When was the music slow and sad? When was it fast? Why?

The Camera Work

The film **Once** was shot in around 17 days with only two handycams for a mere 130.000 Euro. With the two small hand held digital cameras (DV-Format), John Carey was able to keep production costs very low. Indeed, without these two handycams it probably wouldn't have been possible to do the film at all! After shooting the film, all the material is edited down into a final digital version. This final version it is important to note is composed solely of digital pictures. Digital pictures are relatively small because they have a small format. Film audiences, however, expect large images on a big cinema screen. This problem is overcome in the post-production phase by enlarging all these rather small digital images up to the normal standard 35 mm film format that we all know. While this “blowing up” process saves on costs, it also results in a certain loss of picture quality. This gives the film **Once** a kind of “low-budget feel”. Yet, far from this being a potential problem, it curiously adds to the film by giving it a sort of rough realism.

Another interesting point about the camera work concerns John Carey's use of the long shot. Carey often decides to shoot street scenes with Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová using a camera equipped with a long lens. A long lens shot, however, has certain peculiarities which distinguish it from other shots such as a zoom. With a zoom lens, for example, the camera can get “closer” to the object without physically moving the camera. Moreover, as the camera zooms in, the frame or boundaries of the picture also “close in” on the object. When the camera zooms out, this process is reversed. That is to say, the frame “opens out”. A long lens shot is very different. For a start, if a camera equipped with a long lens wants to get closer to the object it must really get closer!

This can be done either by moving the camera closer to the object or moving the object closer to the camera: or a combination of the two. Furthermore, unlike in a zoom shot, in a long lens shot the frame or boundaries of the picture remain fairly unchanged. Film audiences are therefore less prone to notice this shot.

So why does John Carey choose to use the long shot when filming Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová on the streets? Carey gives one simple but important reason. Through the long shot he keeps the camera far away from Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová, thereby helping them feel less nervous and so ensuring they act as naturally as possible. This is very important because both Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová are non-actors. They are not used to working on a film set. By keeping the camera more or less out of their sight, they could relax and feel more comfortable on the set. More importantly, as they felt more secure, they increasingly began to improvise their scenes and ad-lib their dialogue. This gives the film a very special authentic quality.

Questions:

bv: What is a close up shot? When is it normally used?

When people are far away from the camera, you can still get a good picture of them by using a so-called long lens. While this is of course good for spies, when would you use this long shot in a musical?

av: Did the camera move a lot in the film?

Does the film look like a documentary film? Why? Why not?

Analysis of a Film Sequence

In the film **Once**, there are so many wonderful scenes it is difficult to select just one for careful analysis. One especially interesting and complex scene is when the guy is at home sitting alone at a table with his laptop on, composing the song "Lies".

This sequence begins with some close up shots of him working out the lyrics, singing them softly with his guitar. Feeling that the lyrics are right, he starts to sing the song as if he were singing to the laptop. The song continues uninterrupted as there is a cut to the laptop on the table where we see a girl driving a car on its monitor. This is the classic film within a film scenario. The first film is of course the film **Once**. The second film is the one we see on the monitor. Both levels of reality remain separate and are clearly defined.

A closer look at the monitor reveals that it is the same girl that we saw earlier in a photograph beside the guy's bed. Now there is a cut back to the guy singing the song. Watching the monitor as he performs, he looks as if he is were singing the song directly to the girl on the monitor. The song continues as we see the girl again on the monitor. This time, however, the two different levels of reality collapse into one: Now we only see the images of the monitor on the screen. In other words, the screen submerges into the monitor. Now there is only one film reality: that of the monitor. The song still continues as we now see a quick shot of the guy singing to the laptop again. This is followed by happy images of the guy and the girl together. Here, we are again submerged into the level of reality represented by the monitor. The scene cuts back to the guy singing to the laptop again. Now submerging back into the monitor, we see the girl looking straight at us (in other words, towards the camera).

In a crescendo, we now hear the song with full orchestration and backing vocals. It is a stirring moment. Happy images of the two together now quickly follow. Eventually there is a cut back to the guy, but unlike the earlier shots this time he is singing to the laptop with full orchestra and supporting vocals. This softens the cut between the two realities. This is followed by more happy images of the two on the monitor. The song slows as there is a cut back to the guy singing to the laptop with full orchestra and supporting vocals. This cutting between the submerged monitor images and the guy singing to the laptop with full orchestra and supporting vocals continues a couple of more times. The song is still continues as there is now a cut to the Czech girl selling flowers on the street. The song quietly ends as we begin to hear the bustle of the street. The guy approaches the girl. "Hey!" says the guy. "Hi! How are you?" she answers, smiling. Looking a bit serious and rather awkward, he tells the girl "I'm going to go to London. I've decided." "Good. That's great!" she responds.

What makes this scene so interesting is that it mixes the various levels of reality in the film in a most wonderful way. The images of the girl on the monitor almost seem to be like a sort of window into the guy's happier past. In other words, the images we see on the monitor appear like a stream of memories - memories of happier times. In short, John Carey shows us that the guy is nursing a broken heart! Will he really fly to London and get his ex-girlfriend back?

Questions:

- bv: What is a film-in-a-film? Why is a film-in-a-film especially difficult to shoot?**
- av: Do you like this scene? Is it an important scene in the film?
What role does the song play in this sequence?
Why does John Carey show only the images of the monitor on the screen but not the laptop itself, which is on the table?**

The Language

In the film **Once**, the guy speaks with a Dublin accent, while the girl has a Czech accent. This, however, is not a big problem, for the storyline can still be easily followed. Moreover, while it is difficult at times to understand some of the lyrics, all the songs are emotionally very moving. At this level the film functions wonderfully.

Songs in the order of their appearance in the film:

And the Healing Has Begun (van Morrison)	Beginning of the film
Say It To Me Now	Second busker scene
All the Way Down	Bedroom scene
Song Without Words (Mendelssohn)	In music shop
Falling Slowly	In music shop
Leave	Bus scene
The Fair City Waltz	Bus scene
If You Want Me	Girl walking in dark street
Lies	Webcam Images
Whiskey In A Jar	Impromptu dinner performance
Gold (Interference)	Impromptu dinner performance
Trying To Pull Myself Away	Bedroom rehearsal scene
When Your Mind's Made Up	Studio scene
Fallen From the Sky	Studio scene
The Hill	Studio scene
When Your Mind's Made Up	Beach scene
Falling Slowly	Closing sequence
Once	Final film credits

ONCE

Ireland 2008, 85 minutes

Director: John Carey

FSK: 0, recommended age: 14+

English with German subtitles

Main Cast:

The Guy - Glen Hansard

The Girl - Markéta Irglová

Author: Julian Name, 2009