

## **Sounding Different Notes: Approaching the Other through Music in John Carney's film *Once***

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Music...allows sharing with the other(s)  
in difference before and beyond any word  
or cultural specificity (Luce Irigaray).

John Carney's award-winning Irish film *Once* depicts the moving friendship between a male Irish busker and a female Czech immigrant, who come together to record a selection of songs over the course of a week. Carney's film de-centres the patriarchal logos and allows for a space of understanding to be cultivated between two subjectivities devoid of hierarchies and binaries. The friendship that develops between the two characters in the film is both positive and creative. Its focus on music allows for an original way to explore the relationship with the other which is a central issue for a multicultural Ireland. The film also counters a concern of Ruth Barton's that was raised regarding films of the 1990s and that is the 'the absence of any "crossover" successes' (Barton 2004, 179) for small films made in Ireland. Shot over 17 days in Dublin in January 2006 with funding of under €30,000 from the Irish Film Board *Once* took just under \$10m at the US box office. Carney has also achieved enormous success with his modern day musical, with Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová, who play the two main parts, winning an Oscar for their song 'Falling Slowly'. It was also shot on three little Sony HDVs without any of the addenda typical of film sets (Roberts 2007, e-text). Perhaps the benefit of having total artistic control results in an authentic film that is in no way burdened with the expectation of Irishness that the larger movies have. Coupled

with this is the fact that the two stars of the film, Hansard playing the Guy and Irglová playing the Girl, are musicians and not actors. Jennifer Saeger Killelea also points to the authentic contemporary Dublin that Carney creates, saying he ‘addresses various elements of a changing city (immigration, poverty, etc.) without sending a “message” or making overt political statements; he captures the current cultural moment with sensitivity and subtlety’ (2007, e-text). Killelea also suggests that the,

small details, like Guy’s battle with the junkie who tries to steal his busking income, Girl’s Czech neighbours who perfect their English by watching *Fair City*, and a bank manager with unfulfilled dreams of rock’n’roll stardom, all ring true in a really charming way that contributes to the film’s portrayal of an authentic society (2007, e-text).

It is this quiet and subtle approach that Carney uses in the entire film that absorbs an audience and allows for larger ideas to emerge. In this respect, Carney reinserts the political into a film that is anything but political. This brings to mind what Martin McLoone has said about indigenous cinema as being an ‘in-between world of the local and the global’ (2000, 168), where in spite of attempts to signal towards the global commercial cinema successes it remains ‘reflective of particular societal pressures that are native... Their characteristic themes and concerns are, therefore, well worth teasing out. Even if these films are not politically engaged, they can be engaged with politically’ (McLoone 2000, 168). Carney’s understated depiction of the migrant reflects such a sentiment depicting how the migrant experience can also be represented through the creative arts. *Once* reflects the variety of styles that can correspondingly reflect a diversity of experience. In this article, the film is analysed predominantly through the philosophy of Luce Irigaray and her approach to the other and to difference. Carney’s film is an original and very contemporary exploration of relationships in modern Ireland that is as effective in what it does not say as what it does and it lends itself very aptly to an Irigarayan reading.

A brief exploration of Irigaray's philosophy of difference is of value prior to addressing the film. Her philosophy of difference has been central to her work from her seminal thesis *Speculum of the Other Woman* right up to more contemporary works such as *Between East and West* and *The Way of Love*. She addresses the issue of how Western philosophy has always been phallogocentric and hence based around a false premise of the masculine universal. This philosophical tradition, for Irigaray, needs not only to be criticised but challenged and it is in challenging its dominance that there is potential for the becoming of a feminine subjectivity. This opens the possibility of a culture of two subjectivities, a masculine and a feminine one, as well as a culture of 'between two' as opposed to a culture of the 'One' which is phallogocentric. The reason that Irigaray posits a philosophy of difference as oppose to one of equality, is that equality is rooted within the masculine universal and hence in a phallocratic culture. Equality, for Irigaray, is an illusion of patriarchy in the sense that it asks woman to be submissive to a masculine logic and become 'same-as' man which is to merely reproduce her within the male system. While her argument is premised on sexuate difference<sup>1</sup>, as she regards it as the most basic and universal difference, she

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to understand the foundation on which Irigaray bases her discussion of difference, which is grounded first and foremost in sexuate difference. She suggests that proof of our humanity lies in how we relate to one another and that relation must exist at the most basic of differences, that between man and woman. She says:

Man and woman, woman and man are [...] always meeting as though for the first time since they cannot stand in for one another. I shall never take the place of a man, never will a man take mine. Whatever identifications are possible, one will never exactly fill the place of the other – the one is irreducible to the other (Irigaray 1991, 171).

I use the term 'sexuate difference' in favour of 'sexual difference' as this is the term now preferred by Luce Irigaray as stated in a seminar in Liverpool in 2007. She uses 'sexuate' difference and not sexual since it places the emphasis on identity rather than sexuality and identity refers to a cultural identity as well as a natural identity. The term sexuate identity then breaks down the difficulty between interpreting her ideas as either sex (nature) or gender (culture) where sexual is often erroneously (in interpretations of her work) equated with sexuality (Irigaray 2007). She uses her theory of sexuate difference as a premise to engage also with a theory of difference that transcends the masculine and feminine and includes race, age, ethnicity etc.

extends this to a discussion of varying configurations of difference such as race, age, class and ethnicity for example. As she says:

working for the liberation or construction of a feminine subjectivity and a culture of two subjects, we are really working towards the liberation of humanity itself, and towards another time of our becoming as humans. Such a task is especially appropriate in a multicultural era as is ours if we intend to reach a pacific and democratic global society and culture (Irigaray 2004, xv).

*Once* embraces a number of configurations of difference through the friendship between an Irish male busker and female Czech immigrant musician in modern day Dublin. Their differences are grounded in gender, ethnicity and culture, yet their friendship is founded primarily on an approach to the other through music that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers, and is an ideal medium for meeting with the other according to Irigaray. Carney also deconstructs the power of the paternal genealogy by not naming his characters, which allows for an approach to the other that is not based on phallographic dominance.

### **Challenging the Power of Paternal Genealogy**

Both characters are simply referred to as ‘Guy’ and ‘Girl’. This is significant in that paternal genealogy is the premise on which Western society operates; we are named culturally for the father in spite of also having a maternal genealogy. In not acceding to the naming process, the Girl is allowed to maintain her distance from a highly signifying aspect of Western culture. This is important because the Girl both represents a different gender and ethnicity, and naming would locate her within a double category of difference in respect of a culture of the same. The approach to the characters, as viewers, is consequently not grounded in the logos. We come to relate to the characters through music, which changes the audience’s preconceived ideas of how to relate to the other and opens up other possibilities of

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getting to know these characters. The African-American author Toni Morrison states that ‘every life to me has a rhythm, a shape – there are dips and curves as well as straightaways. You can’t see the contours all at once’ (Morrison 1994, 163). This becomes reflective of the two main characters as they negotiate an attraction and friendship that resides within a world of music. Also it is not until the episode in Walton’s music shop that their relationship moves to a very different level and depicts that, as Irigaray says: ‘we can listen to different music but not to different languages. To share a rhythm or a melody is easier and quicker than to share a linguistic universe’ (2004, 136).

### **Rupturing Visual Signifiers of Difference**

As well as rupturing linguistic signifiers of difference Carney also ruptures visual signifiers that serve to categorise the Girl. Our first encounter with her sees her standing with copies of the *Issues* magazine. She also sells roses on Grafton Street and is a domestic cleaner. Her engagement in these jobs serves as an outward manifestation of her immigrant status that can immediately be appropriated by the dominant culture and, if dwelled upon, be used to reduce her to a clichéd set of stereotypes. Irigaray argues that our approach to the other predominantly consists of reducing the other to an ‘object of study’ in spite of the fact that ‘never without doubt has an age spoken so much of the other as ours does, globalisation and migrations requiring it’ (Irigaray 2002b, 124). These images of the Girl are rooted in the economic discourse of power in a growing neo-liberal and capitalist West, where she is situated on the bottom rung of the ladder. There is the risk that Western society could appropriate her through her impoverished existence denying her any sense of autonomy outside of such images. Yet, Carney never allows these images to engulf his subject or to let her become an object of study. They have validity at a practical level but they do not become the defining signifiers of who she is. The constraining dominant economic culture also affects

the Guy, as revealed in the opening exchange. On hearing him sing one evening she applauds him but when she realises it is his own song she asks why he hasn't been playing it during the day to which he replies 'during the day people want to hear songs they know, just songs that they recognise, otherwise, I wouldn't make any money, I play these songs at night, they wouldn't listen [otherwise]' (*Once* 2007). Here music, as work, has been reduced to the economic, where only the instantly recognisable is saleable. It is reminiscent of Jean Baudrillard's simulacra where our world is mediated through copies of copies rather than originals and all worth is placed on, in Irigarayan terms, a concept of 'sameness'. Through their own music though, the characters begin to traverse these limitations of economic and cultural expectations. As Irigaray says:

[sounds] open or re-open a space outside bodies, in bodies and between them. They lay out a place for a possible listening-to, for the respect and the articulation of difference, differences, maintaining or restoring each one in their singularity – outside the subjection of the one to the other, but not without passages between the two (2004, 139).

Carney also subtly juxtaposes the reality of the Guy's and the Girl's life with the fast pace of an economically strident Dublin, something that has since declined. In an early scene we see the Guy and the Girl having coffee in a coffee shop where the camera is recording from the outside, through the window. The city is reflected in the glass, where life appears to pass by in rapid images, to the point where it becomes almost difficult to see the characters, suggesting the struggle of the individual in the face of mass consumerism. It may also suggest that this façade of speed and commerce may not be all it appears and Ireland's current experience of recession suggests that it in fact exposed more inherent inequalities that exist in life. Interrupting these images is the voice of the Girl, a trained pianist, saying, 'I can't get one in Ireland, it's so much money, I can't afford it' (*Once* 2007). She is referring to the cost of a piano in Dublin. In fact Michael O'Connell points to a 2001 UN Report on Human Development of 17 of

the wealthiest OECD countries where 'Ireland ranked second in terms of the proportion of people living in poverty and was sandwiched between the UK in third place and the US in first' (O'Connell 2002, 105). Carney expertly provides a window onto modern day life and then proceeds to go beyond it to explore the nature of relationships that cross gender, ethnic and cultural barriers. He reflects a creativity and energy that does not exist amidst the Grafton Street consumer culture with its high street shops that could resemble any other retail street across the Western world and even increasingly across parts of Asia. In effect, he shuns cultural homogeneity.

The focus of the film is also on what we hear, what we listen to rather than any action we see. Carney says: 'it is more about mood and tone than what's actually going on' (Carney 2007). The film itself seems to deconstruct the cinema's visual authority as a producer of images to explore the power of a relationship that exists in hearing and listening to another person.

### **Ear versus Eye**

The fixity of the eye and the gaze in Western culture and traditional philosophy is challenged through a focus on the aural that requires a change of logic in terms of the approach to the other. This focus on the power of the ear over the eye also forms a central tenet of Irigaray's work since sight forms part of a phallogocentric binary where the visual phallus reigns supreme over woman's hidden sex and the phallus as symbol represents a rigid patriarchy and the symbolic order of language. 'Looking' as she states, results in woman's 'consignment to passivity: she is the beautiful object of contemplation' (Irigaray 1985, 26). She attests to how in ancient traditions the feminine has been characterised by the ear and the masculine by the eye, yet, she insists that if we connect the ear with the feminine and the eye with the masculine that is not to reduce the feminine to a role of passivity. Listening must be both active and passive in order for a transformation

of energy. She contests that:

one has to say “yes” with the whole of oneself, to welcome what is perceived and to let it act. And this requires a receptiveness which is not limited to a simple passivity, and which does not only belong to the ear, even if the ear represents its possibility and its way. The whole body is listening-to, but also the breath, the soul, and such a listening leads to their transmutation, their transfiguration without any fixation or arrest in a form, a concept or an image (Irigaray 2004, 135).

We see this receptiveness to the other materialise in *Once* as something transcending the visual. When the Girl takes the Guy to Walton’s music shop, the dynamic of the film changes. Carney testifies that this is the point where the film actually begins (Carney 2007). As they enter the music shop the Girl pulls the Hoover, which the Guy has agreed to fix, behind her. There is a sense of the traditional role of the feminine, a capitalist culture and everyday concerns being dragged along behind, relegated to second position as they approach each other through music in a tangible exchange of friendship and understanding where a creative space is opened between them. Their exchange and understanding is cultivated through music, they each play for the other and the initial scepticism that seems to reside between them dissipates.

The use of music as a means of communication also associates it with the feminine, the pre-symbolic and a site of fluidity and rhythm. It reflects the sense of Julia Kristeva’s semiotic chora unbound by the structures of the symbolic.<sup>2</sup> For

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<sup>2</sup> While Kristeva accepts elements of the symbolic order she discusses how it can be ruptured with the presence of the semiotic. The semiotic is the bodily drive as discharged in signification. It is associated with the rhythms, tones, and movement of signifying practices as well as with the maternal body where the first tones, rhythms etc. are experienced. (Kristeva 2002, 43). As the child enters into language he/she moves away from the semiotic. This is called the ‘rite of defilement’. However, once the child enters into the symbolic this does not mean that he/she leaves the semiotic behind. One is part of the other; they cannot exist in isolation. Kristeva believes that without the symbolic signification would be incomprehensible so we need the symbolic to provide a structure for signification. However, without the semiotic she thinks there would be no importance or meaning to language. Poetry and music are examples of semiotic expressions: a return of the body to signification and places it within the realm of language but it does not provide a stable presence, rather a destabilising one that consistently ruptures our methods of signification.

Kristeva too, the semiotic chora is also free from specularisation, ‘the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm’ (Kristeva 2002, 36). The semiotic ruptures the symbolic with its tones and rhythms, neither one can exist without the other. The use of music in the film serves almost like a rupturing of the symbolic by the semiotic because the music acts as the source of communication between the Guy and the Girl outside of the English language. In this respect what occurs through music is not explained through a definite plot narrative that explains the music but rather exists independently of it. It is the music that explains the characters’ relationship and not their narrative discourse and therefore music is the site of true understanding.

### **Unburdened by the Past**

Dealing with past issues as they resurrect in the present has restricted many attempts at engaging with an Ireland of the here and now. McLoone, in discussing the influence of American culture on Ireland’s cultural identity, discusses its effect in recent generational conflict films where the incomplete family is a common trope that is founded on the ‘absence or inadequacy’ (2000, 186) of one of the parents. McLoone also considers that these oedipal themes of the family, and a focus on incest and child-abuse, reflect the trauma of the nation and its inherent instability (2000, 168). However, Carney in *Once*, moves beyond this and instils, instead, a sense of displacement in the experience of the other in contemporary Irish society. He also subtly displaces the fractured family unit even though the Guy’s mother is dead. But there is no sense that she had a dominating influence on either the Guy or his father implying her absence is not a site of repressed trauma. Instead Carney provides a more affirmative reading of the family where the Guy’s father is, in many ways, feminised, depicting the hybridity of his role through his positive and caring relationship with his son.

Carney suggests that Irish identity does not always have to be rooted in the past but can emerge in an engagement with the present.

The fractured family is also a reality for the Girl who has come to Ireland with her mother and her daughter and the implication is that she has left her husband. The image of the three females conjures up that common trope of the Toni Morrison novel, the all female household, representing the power of a female genealogy that actively resists a patriarchal culture. In relation to Morrison's work, Barbara Hill Rigney has said that 'particularly when women live communally without men...they operate outside of history and outside of the dominant culture' (1991, 75). Carney invests a sense of the transgressive and transformative space for the female in his film especially as she renews her creativity through music that stands outside the dominant discourse.

### **The Between Space of Once**

Considering the subject of a creative space, Irigaray believes that recognition of two sexed subjects provides the energy for a cultivated space to emerge between the two as they realise the limits of their subjectivity. To acknowledge this allows for a space between two to be created. If we resist and assimilate the other within a logic of the One, then 'the space kept free for approaching is then already filled, and the approach becomes impossible' (Irigaray 2002a, 158). To remove ourselves from a logic of the One we must begin to understand that 'a subject is not an object or a thing, and it does not suffice to name it in order to designate what is proper to it and to permit this subject to be present' (Irigaray 2002a, 158). To do this means the other will be subjugated to the One in spite of whether or not this occurs under what Luce Irigaray terms 'a model of paternal generosity'. However, a between space is created in *Once* through a non-appropriation of the other. The Girl is recognised inherently on her own merit devoid of preconceived notions of identity, as we see in Carney's refusal to dwell on the Girl's

aforementioned signifiers of difference. The Guy is also recognised on his own merit as his role as a busker fades very quickly into the background. Both characters awaken something critical within the other without ever appropriating the other. There is no possession, just a letting be. The most intimate revelations of the characters always occur through music and so are also not appropriated by a phallographic language. In fact, when they engage solely through language there is always the sense of a lack of real understanding between them and the constant risk of cultural misunderstandings. The characters instead become both animated and assured when they relate through music. When the Girl asks the Guy about his ex-girlfriend, he is only able to articulate his pain through song, while she also articulates the heartbreak of her relationship with her husband through song. Music and song, according to Irigaray ‘allow for a passing between the body and the mind, and perhaps from the masculine to the feminine’ (2004, 139). Song can, ‘[provide] a space for meeting where the two are already in some way present – a place that belongs neither to the one nor to the other, but is inhabited by each one and by the relationship between the two’ (Irigaray 2004, 139).

Through the medium of music neither character is appropriated by the other nor does either character have to submit to the dominant culture of the other. Both characters are already present through the medium of music, and through music there arises an understanding between them based on what Irigaray calls wonder, which is induced by that recognition of the mystery of the other, the irreducibility of the one to the other. For her: ‘wonder...sees something as though always for the first time, and never seizes the other as its object. Wonder cannot seize, possess or subdue such an object. The latter, perhaps, remains subjective and free?’ (Irigaray 1991, 172). Carney, in filming, does not try to possess the characters. There is always distance maintained, in a symbolic sense, between the two throughout. Their sexual attraction is obvious but never fulfilled; it is their relationship through music that remains dominant. Even at various times when we

see both characters in a contemplative mood such as the Girl at the party, the Guy as he waits for the girl as she calls her mother, and again the Guy when he listens to the Girl's own original music the pose is not dwelt on. In contrast to mainstream film where we would see a close-up shot revealing in some way his/her thoughts and feelings, Carney says that he deliberately maintains a distance or space (Carney 2007). In doing this we are unable to appropriate the relationship for ourselves as we view the film. Also in the final crane shot we see the Girl play the piano, which the Guy has bought her as a gift before leaving for London. Her husband and child are in the background. As she finishes playing, we see her stare out the window and the camera moves to a wide-angle shot that prevents us from fully interrogating her face in the hope of understanding what her feelings may be. Carney allows the relationship to exist at a level of wonder where the audience cannot consume or possess the storyline. This is resonant of the distance Irigaray advocates in any relationship between two subjects. She replaces the common declaration of 'I love you' with the more indirect statement of 'I love *to* you'. The reason for this is to retain a sense of movement between two and to allow both to retain their own irreducible subjectivity. As she states:

the "to" is the site of non-reduction of the person to the object. I love you, I desire you, I take you, I seduce you, I order you, I instruct you, and so on, always risk annihilating the alterity of the other, of transforming him/her into my property, my object, of reducing him/her to what is mine, into mine, meaning what is already a part of my field of existential or material properties. The "to" is also a barrier against alienating the other's freedom in my subjectivity, my world, my language (Irigaray 1996, 110).

The distance created by Carney facilitates the emergence of a creative relationship between the two characters.

Also, a between space that is a site of creativity is created through the very act of the filming itself. Carney speaks of the natural feel of the film and undoubtedly part of its charm is its authenticity. This authenticity is rooted in the fact that both the Guy and the Girl have actually written and performed the songs

in the film; they (Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová) have already come together to create music. They are also friends and the Girl *is* from the Czech Republic. The telling of the story of the Guy's relationship with his ex-girlfriend through images of their past life together is, in fact, a real life montage of Carney's life with his fiancée. Carney also played bass in Hansard's band *The Frames* during the 1990s. The party scene where everyone must sing comprises of all his own friends and the lady who sings is Hansard's mother. When they film the break scene in the recording studio Carney says that it is just them having a break (Carney 2007). In this sense, the film itself serves as the in-between space or passage between two that results in a creative and generative site. The hierarchical relationship between a director and his cast is ruptured. Where Carney provides leadership in direction, Hansard and Irglová provide it through their music. It is a non-competitive relationship where people bring their own individual talents and subsequently traverse the barriers and limitations of a culture of the One. Irglová has commented on the creative process of the film to Rebecca Murray describing it as follows:

that was one of the comforts about shooting the film, the fact that I was working with somebody that I knew very well that I had friendship with, music with...You can feel from the screen that we had some kind of connection. And during the making of the film I just almost felt relaxed (Irglová 2007, e-text).

Even her language is indicative of a space between two: she has a friendship with and music with; there is a sense of sharing without possession.

Carney's film is affirmative and authentic in that it portrays a real Dublin with real characters and he is not afraid to step outside the recurring theme of past trauma in order to engage fruitfully with the present. He makes a modern film about the power of music and friendship overcoming limitations, both internal and external, in contemporary Irish life. If we do not overcome these limitations, then we, as Irigaray says:

avoid the problem of meeting with the stranger, with the other. We avoid letting ourselves be moved, questioned, modified, enriched by the other as such. We do not look for a way for a cohabitation or a coexistence between subjects of different but equivalent worth. We flee dialogue with a you irreducible to us, with the man or woman who will never be I, nor me, nor mine. And who for this very reason, can be a you, someone with whom I exchange without reducing him or her to myself, or reducing myself to him or her (2002b, 125).

In allowing the other to be present, without the risk of appropriation, the audience is moved by the humanity of *Once*. A small budget film, it has become a national and international success, again traversing boundaries between cultures. It asks us can we look beyond the visual manifestations of difference to see the potential of the individual that resides within? Through fear and an illogical desire to reduce everything to the familiar a pattern of avoidance of the other that denies the possibility of the self's own becoming is often created. Stripped of pretensions, *Once* elucidates a way forward for approaching the other which avoids the desire to assimilate the other into one's own existence denying him/her a unique subjectivity.

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