



# BRITISH SCHOOLS FILM FESTIVAL #4

## STUDY GUIDE FOR THE FILM **IT'S A FREE WORLD**

UK/I/D/E 2007, directed by Ken Loach.

Questions for the class are organized in two categories: before viewing (bv) and after viewing (av). A work sheet with planned activities is also attached.

### **Synopsis:**

It's a free world! Or is it? This is one of the main questions raised in Ken Loach's film from 2007, **It's a Free World**. The main character in the film is Angie (played by Kierston Wareing). She's "quite a girl" as Loach puts it - ambitious, hard-working and at times ruthless. But she can also be tender and sentimental. Her flat-mate in London is Rose (played by Juliet Ellis). She is equally hard-working, but more timid. The two complement each other perfectly, giving the film an interesting and well-rounded focus.

We first meet Angie in Katowice, Poland, where she is interviewing Polish job-seekers as a recruitment agent for the company, Coreforce Recruitment. Speaking only through a Polish translator, she asks each job-seeker about their previous work experience, and whether they are willing to do other types of jobs. Once satisfied, she asks the person to sign a contract. As soon as the contract is signed, the job-seeker becomes a client of the recruitment agency. The agency now provides its client with certain services (i.e. organizing the trip from Poland to Britain, guaranteeing a job, arranging for accommodation), but of course in exchange for a payment or fee (often called a signing-on fee). Angie receives this payment - normally in cash - on behalf of the recruitment agency. This is how a private recruitment agency earns profits. Angie is eager to stress that "all this is straight forward and above board", but this exchange is equivalent only at first glance - in effect, the job-seeker is paying hard cash in order to be able to work.

In order to better understand the beginning of this film, it is very important to note, that since Poland became a member of the European Union in 2004, Polish workers have enjoyed unrestricted access to the British labor market. That is, they do not have to apply for a special work permit from the British Ministry of Employment, when looking for a work in United Kingdom. Polish workers employed in the British labor market, therefore, have a completely legal status. And operating a British recruitment agency in Poland is an entirely legal business. The legal situation for Polish workers in Germany, however, is radically different. Under German Federal law, Polish workers enjoy only a very restricted access to the German labor market. Only when Polish workers have first successfully obtained a special work permit given by the Federal German Employment Agency, are they legally allowed to work in Germany. All those who do not have this permit are working illegally. This is the big difference.

Ironically, when Angie returns back to her office in London, she is given the sack. Angrily she fights with her boss, arguing that she had met all her targets and delivered countless clients to the company, but to no avail. The world of capricious hire and fire seems not only to lie in Poland, but in Great Britain as well. Walking home, feeling defeated, she tells her flat-mate in the kitchen, "I'm 33 Rose. I mean, I'm twelve Grand (twelve thousand pounds) in debt, have a string of credit cards, one shitty job after another... I don't know what to do!" This description captures well many of her generation - the daily struggle to keep your job, organizing your life as best you can and still feeling you are not going anywhere! But Angie also feels she is at a crossroads in her life. She senses that something decisive has to happen. This is what makes her such an interesting character - she always bounces back. While having a drink with her flat-mate Rose in a pub, she decides to announce her new plan. "I'm going to set up my own agency", she declares. Rose is at first skeptical, but Angie impatiently counters, "I've been thinking about this long and hard."

I know this job back to front, inside out, upside down. I know what I'm doing!" Shaking her head, Rose says, "You're always talking." Now even more determined, Angie continues, "No, I'm not talking. I'm doing it! And no more orders. Never again! Unless they come from me this time." Attempting to establish such an enterprise on your own is, of course, doomed to fail. Fully aware of this, Angie adds, "I need you Rose."

With Rose more or less on board, Angie moves swiftly, quickly finding a base of operations in a well-situated delivery yard located in the back of a pub as her site. "Cutting a deal" with the pub owner, Angie turns to Rose, saying, "We can just start." Still feeling unsure about the whole project, Rose says, "But starting up isn't that easy. We've got no papers, no license, no contracts, no bank account. We've got nothing... We haven't even got an office!" Having already thought of that, Angie rapidly answers, "We've got a flat". Rose then asks, "What about tax and VAT (value added tax)?" Here, Angie responds by saying, "It doesn't matter Scheiß for six months and by then we'll be flying." This answer is very revealing. Angie is basically telling Rose that she wants to set up an illegal recruitment agency business - if only for six months. She is not planning of paying any tax whatsoever, because she is not planning of officially registering their business. By the time the authorities become aware of their activities, they will have shut down their operations, and will have opened up a new fully legitimate recruiting agency business on other premises. The dream of having a legitimate recruiting agency after six months ultimately persuades Rose of Angie's plan. "All I need now is a motorbike" she says, while quickly turning to Rose to ask, "How much can you get on your credit card?"

Now crisscrossing London on a motorbike, Angie starts promoting her new venture. With all her enormous work experience at her disposal, Angie knows exactly what employers want to hear. Using all her charms, she asks a boss, "Do you know the Angie and Rose Recruitment Agency? We are the next big thing!" She then makes all the key points that only a boss could dream of, saying, "We've got Eastern European workers set up, ready to go, right now. Hard working, work overtime, work shift work, evenings, all the time. We've got everything, everything there. But the good thing, what you would like to know is... we're all girls....and all under the age of 30." Angie can clearly talk in a language bosses understand. Rose too has a talent for promotion, but she has a different style of language. Using phrases more commonly heard from a call center, she explains to one employer, "We're a multi-tasking, high energy female workforce with a fleet of representatives on motorbikes. And we can solve your problem within the hour... Our rates are very competitive and we'll match or better any deal you've got now". The two styles clearly complement each other. The message, however, is the same - we've got cheap labor, if you don't ask any questions. And do the employers ask any questions? Hardly! Do they take up this enticing offer? They certainly do.

Yet, as the money begins to roll in, so do the problems. Fights begin to occur over pay-slips, with their numerous deductions for tax, national insurance and overhead costs. Angie and Rose of course have no intention of paying tax or national insurance. For them, these deductions are simply a way of concealing part of their profits. Nevertheless, not to be intimidated, Angie tells the disgruntled workers, "That's your hours. That's your total. If you don't like it, there's the gate! You can go!" Here again we see how ruthless Angie can be. Although clearly able to coerce people back to work, constantly confronting workers in this way is still very emotionally exhausting for her. At home things are also not easy. Angie's eleven year old son Jamie has gotten into conflict with the school authorities after breaking the jaw of another schoolboy. The boy's parents have informed the police and the incident is to be investigated by both the Crown Prosecution Service (Staatsanwalt) and the Youth Panel (Jugendamt). Inquiries, of course, are also going to be made into Angie's life as well.

Eager to further increase the profits of their agency, Angie starts providing illegal aliens with falsified passports. While Rose has qualms about this, she eventually goes along with the idea, knowing that they can make an extra-profit out of them. In effect, being thankful as well as at the complete mercy of their boss, illegal workers are an especially compliant and therefore profitable section of the labor market. Ironically, serious problems arise, not from the Immigration Services, but from a common sub-contractor (Subunternehmer), operating in the construction industry. Not being paid himself, he, in turn, is unable to pay Angie the money she needs in order to finally pay the wages of her recruited Polish construction workers. Although she is still able to coerce the people back to work, the situation is clearly becoming dangerous.

Added to this is the stress she is now getting from her father, who strongly disapproves of her business. While sitting together on a park bench, they finally have it out. "I'm sick of being judged all the time. Doesn't anyone see what I'm doing? I should be getting some praise. I've set up my own business. I've worked my fucking ass off...and I've paid off all my debts...I'm doing something in this world." says Angie. Shaking his head, he counters, "No one is getting anything out of it except the bosses and the government." Now Angie starts shaking her head, saying, "You got it completely wrong! The consumers, they're the ones laughing. You see that the next time you go to the supermarket." Focusing back onto the workers, he asks insistently, "Do you pay these people the minimum wage?! Tell me!" Angrily turning to her father she answers, "For 30 years you've been on the same job, right? Me and you are very different. Dad, 30 years the same job. I've had over 30 jobs. I have been completely dumped and screwed in every single one of them. That's where we are different...no disrespect to you dad, alright? But I don't want to end up poor like you." Listening to her hard words, he asks, "So, you and Jamie. Just the two of you and all the rest of the world can go to hell." This hard but very honest discussion highlights the very different world Angie and many of her generation live in today. It's a world very different from the past, where her father comes from.

Desperately chasing the sub-contractor, she finally realizes there is no money. Now unable to pay the wages of the Polish construction workers, Angie and Rose decide to divide up their profits. If Rose wants to compensate the unpaid workers, she can do it from her share. That's Angie's position. Snarling at Rose, Angie says, "You know what Rose...if you want to pay them, pay them out of your own cash. Yeah? It's a free world! Cause I don't give a shit. OK? Just do what you fucking want!" These are very harsh words. With accusations flying, neither one is seriously thinking about the unpaid Polish construction workers. This turns out to be a big mistake. For while they may not be thinking much about these workers, these workers are certainly thinking a lot about them. This is dramatically shown when a stone is thrown through their kitchen window. Wrapped around it is a paper with the word "Thief" written on it. Later on, Angie is brutally attacked by two men on the street near her home. In one final dramatic scene, three masked men break into her flat, tying Angie up. Finding a pile of money, one of the men says, "You owe twenty men 2000 pounds each. We want our money...Nothing more, nothing less...You still owe us 30,000 pounds...If you make one call, before we tell you, you will never see Jamie again!" After leaving, however, Jamie returns home, carrying some pizza, completely unaware of the danger he was in. Now promising to pay the remaining 30,000 pounds, we see Angie in the final scene of the film recruiting illegal workers from the Ukraine. Her dream of establishing a fully legitimate recruiting agency business seems to have gone sour.

### **Questions:**

**bv: How many of you work or do small jobs like baby-sitting or working in a Kiosk? Is it good to earn your own money? What different types of work do you know (i.e. seasonal work, temporary work, full-time job etc.)? Does anyone know what a recruitment agency is?**

**Is it easy to start a business? What characteristics must you have as a boss?**

**What do we know about the living conditions of illegal aliens in Germany? Can they be officially employed in a company? If they are injured at work, can they officially go to the hospital? Can their children officially go to school?**

**av: Although Angie and Rose have done some very bad things, are they really bad people? How would you describe their character?**

**Why does Angie's father so strongly disapprove of their recruitment agency? Do you agree? Explain.**

**How does a recruitment agency work? Why does Angie give the illegal aliens falsified passports? What is her motive?**

**Does the film have a happy ending? Explain.**

## **Moral Issues in It's a Free World**

It is worth noting, that the film *It's a Free World* has two very interesting features. Firstly, while the film is clearly about people who come to Britain to work, the story is always presented solely from the point of view of the people who actually do the exploiting. That is to say, from Angie's and to a lesser extent from Rose's points of view. While Angie can certainly be ruthless at times, she can also be very tender. Moreover, as a single-parent, she is very loving to her young son Jamie. Rose too is not presented in simple black and white terms. Sensing that her life is not going anywhere, she dreams of having her own legitimate recruiting agency. Knowing that this is not easy to achieve, she depends on Angie's hardnosed determination, but then always has qualms. Indeed, even the workers - exploited as they are in the film - are never presented as passive victims, but instead in a very respectful manner. In this way, Ken Loach is very cleverly able to avoid any sense of sentimentality, thereby giving the film a great strength.

Secondly, the film *It's a Free World* raises the question what does it mean to be free? This is essentially what Angie and Rose are about - their implicit search for freedom. But what does freedom actually mean for them? Does it mean freedom from your daily cares? Does it mean freedom from badly paid work? Does it mean freedom from the constraints of being a poor single-parent mother? This is not the hippy type of "freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose." Angie and Rose certainly don't want that type of freedom! Nor are they convinced by the idea that freedom is doing what you want as long as you don't infringe on the freedoms of others. After all, operating a recruitment agency - and an illegal one at that -inevitable means that the rights of others are ignored. For Angie, and to a lesser extent Rose, freedom means confronting the hard necessities of life in order to reach what you want. For them, freedom is not something abstract. Freedom and necessity are not seen as opposites. Instead, for Angie, they are intimately connected. This is Angie's great insight. Indeed, this is what makes her such a fascinating and at times tragic figure. Angie and Rose are not evil or bad people, and them wanting to do something with their lives is certainly praiseworthy. But in the highly competitive world of the global labor market, how far are Angie and Rose willing to go to exploit people in order to increase their profits? And what type of freedom does Angie actually enjoy at the end of the film?

### **Questions:**

**bv: What does freedom mean for you? How would you define it?**

**av: Why has Ken Loach decided to shoot a film about a recruitment agency strictly from the point of view of a boss? What does Angie tell us about ourselves and about our society as a whole? Does Angie achieve what she wants?**

### **The Camera Work**

Generally speaking, in *It's a Free World* the camera takes on the role of a quiet neutral observer. There are no elaborately complicated camera shots in the film. Nor do we find any shaky hand-held camera shots so typical of so many fake documentaries. Here, the art of simplicity is exercised. In particular - like in so many of Loach's films - the strength of the camera work lies in the framing. What is framing? This can be easily illustrated. Whenever we glance out the window, our view is always limited by the window frame. How much the window frame delimits our view, of course, can change. When we get closer to the window, we can see more outside or we can look at something in more detail. In either case, we usually have more light. If we move further away from the window, our view narrows and we can perceive things only in less detail. In either case, we usually have less light. How close we stand to the window and how long we look outside the window is usually decided very unconsciously. For a film director, however, these decisions are of the greatest importance, and must be carefully made. The position of the film camera, the use of a particular lens and the duration of a shot all has a direct effect on the framing of a scene. Ken Loach is so good at making these decisions, that we do not even notice it as an audience. Behind this apparently simple visual style lies a tremendous amount of work.

Ken Loach uses a variety of conventional camera shots in his film. While we may not be consciously aware of these camera shots, all these shots are quite well known to us. First there is what is called the whole shot, total shot or full shot, which pictures the main characters of a specific scene from head to foot. A whole shot is often used at the beginning of a film sequence in order to provide viewers with the orientation they need in order to follow a certain action. This opening shot is often called an establishing shot, because it establishes the parameters of the scene for the audience.

The next type of camera shot often used in the film is the so-called half-shot. These shots normally frame the main figures of a specific scene from the head to about the waist. When using these shots, it is generally assumed that the audience already knows about the time and location of the specific action being set. Unlike the whole shot, the half-shot gets closer to the figures, which makes it more intimate or more intense. An early example of the development from an establishing whole shot to a half-shot is when we see Angie arguing with her boss in his office. The establishing whole shot informs the audience that we are no longer in Katowice, Poland, but now in London. Then we see both Angie and her boss each framed in a half-shot, arguing with each other. In this rather tense scene, Angie has just been informed that she is losing her job. Ken Loach uses the half-shot to further emphasize this tension. This pattern from a whole-shot to a half-shot is repeated throughout the film (i.e. when Angie first meets Mahmoud's whole family, hiding illegally in a derelict building).

Another camera shot often used by Ken Loach is the close-up. In this type of shot, the audience normally sees only the face of the main figure or figures of the scene. This is a very intimate and emotionally intense shot because the camera is very close to the characters and their action. A very good example of the development from an establishing whole shot, to a half-shot and then to close-up shots is the scene when Angie takes the Polish worker Karol back to where he lives on her motorcycle, visiting the illegal caravan site for the first time. We see them in an establishing whole shot as they ride into the camp. This is to help orient viewers to the new location. When the two get off the motorbike and begin talking, we see them framed in a half-shot. Karol invites Angie inside his caravan for a drink. When they are both tenderly kissing each other on his bed inside the caravan, we see them framed in a close-up shot.

By using the various different camera shots, Ken Loach is able to frame the action of each scene exactly as he wants. The result is a very tight and logically constructed visual narrative. Moreover, by carefully mixing the various camera shots Loach is also able to establish the different levels of intimacy or emotional intensity of each individual scene. This gives the film a very important emotional rhythm, which further underscores the drama of the story.

#### **Questions:**

**bv:** How many of you have already shot something with a cell-phone, cam-recorder etc.? What camera shots do you know? What role does a close-up shot play?

**av:** In the film there are no shaky hand-held camera shots, rapid zoom-ins and zoom-outs or elaborate helicopter shots. Is this a strength or weakness of the film? How would you describe the visual style of the film?

**Language:** Typical of Ken Loach, language always adds an extra dimension to his films. In entering the world of today's highly globalized labor market it is therefore not surprising, that there are a lot of different, and at times difficult, accents to be heard in the film. Added to this is a vocabulary very specific to the labor market. For your convenience and to help you better understand the meaning of these technical terms, a list of key definitions is provided.

**Casuals:** Casuals are people who are paid solely according to the number of hours or days they have worked. They enjoy no legal benefits like, for example, against work injuries. Casual work should not be confused with temporary work (called "temping" in the UK). People who do temporary work in the UK pay taxes on their wages, but are in turn entitled to a number of legal benefits. This is not the case for those doing casual work.

**Illegal caravan site:** A camp established against the law or without official permission. While the camp, usually a group of trailers, is illegal, the inhabitants of the camp do not have to be illegal. In such a camp, the common amenities of water, gas and electricity are often lacking.

**Illegal workers:** These are people who are engaged in employment without the specific legal authorization of the state. Illegal workers contravene either employment or immigration law.

**Minimum wage:** This is the lowest possible wage that regulations allow to be paid by an employer.

**Overhead costs:** Often simply called “overheads”, these are the current fixed costs normally incurred by an employer (i.e. costs for heating, lighting, rent etc.), even when the business is not momentarily in operation.

**Overtime:** Overtime is the additional number of hours worked above and beyond your regular working hours. While in some sectors of the economy overtime is not remunerated, in other sectors they may entail higher wage costs for the employer.

**Pay-slip:** A pay-slip is a piece of paper showing how the worker’s pay has been calculated as well as listing all deductions, like for taxes or accrued arrears.

**Seasonal work:** Seasonal work is normally associated with agricultural activities like planting or harvesting. Seasonal workers can also be found in the construction industry as well as in the retail services, like during the Christmas season.

**Shift work:** Typical of factory work, it involves having a set of workers start work just when another set of workers are finishing. In this way machines can continue to operate without interruption.

**Value Added Tax (VAT):** A tax levied on the increased value of an article, product or service (i.e. Umsatzsteuer).

## **IT’S A FREE WORLD**

**UK//D//E 2007, 92 minutes**

**Director: Ken Loach**

**FSK: 12, recommended age: 14+**

**English with German subtitles**

**Themes: globalisation, employment market, labour leasing, capitalism, migration, ,illegal’ workers, ethics, family, generations**

**Study Guide by Julian Name, 2010**

## **WAS IST BRITFILMS?**

**BRITFILMS ist eine Schulfilmreihe der AG Kino-Gilde, Verband der Programmkinos und Filmkunsttheater in Deutschland. Sechs englischsprachige Filme touren 16 Monate lang durch die deutschen Kinos und werden von den Kinobetreibern in Schulvorführungen für Kinder im Alter von 8-18 Jahren eingesetzt. Die Vorführungen können direkt in den teilnehmenden Kinos gebucht werden.**

**Begleitend werden Fortbildungen/Filmreviews für Englischlehrer und –lehrerinnen angeboten. Ebenso gibt es als pädagogisches Begleitmaterial englischsprachige Study Guides zu allen Filmen als Download. Das Ziel von BRITFILMS ist der Aufbau eines Netzwerks aus Filmtheatern, Verbänden und Schulen, dass sich kontinuierlich für die Vermittlung von englischer Filmkultur in Deutschland einsetzt. Informationen zu allen Filmen, Termine der Fortbildungsveranstaltungen, englischsprachige Study Guides und Tourneedaten unter: [www.britfilms.de](http://www.britfilms.de)**



**BRITFILMS**

**AG Kino – Gilde deutscher Filmkunsttheater e.V.**

**Rosenthaler Str. 34/35, 10178 Berlin, Tel.: (030) 257 608 40,**

**Fax: (030) 257 608 43, [info@agkino.de](mailto:info@agkino.de)**



# BRITISH SCHOOLS FILM FESTIVAL #4

## WORK SHEET FOR THE FILM **IT'S A FREE WORLD** BY KEN LOACH

### 1. Characterisation

Fold a page in half from the top to the bottom. On the left, make a list of words describing first Angie's and then Rose character. Opposite each word find a scene in the film which illustrates this trait. Work in small groups. Afterwards discuss as a class all the different descriptions and scenes. Which scenes are considered the best illustration of a specific trait?

### 2, Turning Points

Again in small groups, look carefully at the list of scenes. Do any of these scenes represent a turning point in the film? That is to say, when the story goes in a different direction than perhaps you had expected. Identify one or two of these turning points, and write down why you think they are important to the film. Afterwards discuss your points in class.

### 3. Discuss: Do you approve of Angie's business?

Ask the class which figure or figures strongly disapproved of Angie's work. The only figure who was consistently against Angie's and Rose's recruitment agency was Angie's father (Angie's mother is also not too happy with Angie's work, but she played a much smaller role in the film). After reading out all part of the dialogue (see above) between Angie and her father, while they were sitting on a park bench, divide the class into groups. Some groups should agree with Angie's father, making a list of arguments in his favor. Other groups should agree with Angie, making a list of arguments in her favor. Afterwards discuss the pros and cons of Angie's "illegal" recruiting agency.

### 4. Research: The Situation in Germany

Allow the pupils time to do research (i.e. via internet) on the issue of illegal aliens and illegal workers in Germany. While this is a wide and complex subject, groups should focus on the following questions:

- a. In which sections of the German economy do we find illegal workers?
- b. Do the children of illegal workers have the right to go to school in Germany?
- c. Which state organizations and NGOs are involved in these issues (Immigration Service, Ministry of Employment, Pro Asyl etc.)? What are their positions?

Once the research is done and presented in class, a discussion should take place concerning the pros and cons of illegal workers in Germany.