

## Route Irish Study Notes



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**Directed by:** Ken Loach  
**Certificate:** 15  
**Running time:** 109 mins  
**Release date:** 18 March 2011

### Synopsis:

Fergus (Mark Womack) returns to his native Liverpool for the funeral of his childhood friend Frankie (John Bishop), a fellow private security contractor who has been killed on 'Route Irish', the deadly and now infamous stretch of road between Baghdad airport and the Green Zone. Refusing to accept the official account of his best friend's death, Fergus launches his own investigation, fuelled by the discovery of a cell phone on which Frankie had recorded the shooting of an innocent Iraqi family just days before his own death. As his investigation ramps up – via frequent skype conversations with former security colleagues in Iraq and his interrogation of security firm officials in the UK – Fergus soon draws the heat of those he is investigating and a once dirty foreign war is transferred to the streets of Liverpool and pursued on home turf.

## Before seeing the film

Reflect back on the way the war in Iraq has been covered by the media.

1. How much have your impressions of the war been influenced by films like *Green Zone* (Greengrass, 2010) and *The Hurt Locker* (Bigelow, 2008)?
2. What impact did these films have on you compared with images of war on the television news?
3. The French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, has argued that coverage of the war was a spectacle that concealed (rather than revealed) the reality of the war itself. To what extent do you think that is true?

## After seeing the film

### Route Irish and the war in Iraq

Films like *Green Zone* and *The Hurt Locker* explored the war by focusing on the drama and tension of the conflict itself. Both films aimed to give audiences some sense of what it would be like to be a soldier on the ground. By comparison, *Route Irish* contains very few scenes set in Iraq and is about private contractors rather than soldiers.

1. What do you think the filmmakers hoped to achieve by making a film about Iraq set almost exclusively in the UK?

The Iraqi translator in the film questions whether Fergus is really interested in the plight of the Iraqis or is only interested in what happened to his own friend.

2. To what extent could you make the same allegation against the director, Ken Loach? Is the film sufficiently engaged with the suffering of Iraqi victims?

Ken Loach has said that the film comes from his own anger about the situation in Iraq.

3. What do you think a film like this can achieve?
4. In what ways do you think that audiences' views might be changed by the experience of watching *Route Irish*?

*Route Irish* made very little impact on the British box office.

5. Why do you think it failed to attract audiences in the way that other 'Iraq films' have?

### Challenging the Audience

In some respects, *Route Irish* is a departure for Ken Loach and the film challenges some of our expectations. The film contains many more features of the thriller genre than most of his (predominantly social realist) work. Some critics have questioned his ability to manage the thriller elements in *Route Irish*.

1. Did you find the film gripping, or did you feel as one critic did that 'clunky exposition' (conveying information) slowed it down?
2. Does the plot 'add up' or do you feel that Loach and his screenwriter Paul Laverty may have been more interested in the big issues rather than the details of their own narrative?

## Extension Activities:

1. Paul Haggis' film *In the Valley of Elah* (2007) has a similar subject matter to *Route Irish* but is more comfortably grounded in Hollywood thriller conventions. Watch the trailers for both films and try to compare the ways in which the two films might appeal to mainstream audiences.
2. The anti-hero in cinema does not always play well with audiences. Fergus clearly has many flaws and is evidently scarred by his experiences. Do you think he is sufficiently sympathetic for audiences to engage with?
3. Watch *Taxi Driver* (1976), Martin Scorsese's classic representation of another war veteran struggling to come to terms with civilian life. Compare the plight and representation of these two anti-heroes.

## Route Irish – The problems of UK film distribution

*Route Irish* opened on only 20 screens in the UK (compared to 124 screens in France). Loach himself has criticised the dominance of Hollywood films in chain cinemas. To try to make sure the film reached a reasonable audience, the film was released simultaneously in cinemas, online and via the satellite subscription channel, Sky Movies.

1. How important do you think it is that a range of films from different countries and for different audiences are shown in cinemas?
2. Do you think that the availability of films online and on DVD means that this is no longer such an important issue?
3. Despite the simultaneous release, Loach has emphasised how much he would prefer audiences to see his film on the cinema screen rather than at home. In what ways do you think home viewing would change the impact of a film like *Route Irish*?
4. Nick James, editor of *Sight and Sound* magazine, believes that '...there is a large young audience with a hunger for a different kind of cinema from what they get at the multiplex'. Do you agree? What type of films would you like to see programmed at your local cinema?
5. Ken Loach is 75 but he seems more aware than many younger directors of the potential for using new technology to show his films. He has a YouTube channel where some of his films can be seen legally, uninterrupted and for free. How do you think other filmmakers could embrace sites like YouTube? What content, other than the films themselves, would you like to have available online?

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