

'Sleep Furiously': The Important Thing

By Cynthia Fuchs

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"It's important to keep the old farm traditions going." In the tiny Welsh town of Trefeurig, these traditions are incessantly present and also passing. *Sleep Furiously* contemplates this simultaneous extension and contraction of time, the ways that people can look back and forward at once, on experiences that are both fleeting and enduring.

A variety of farm traditions are made visible in Gideon Koppel's exquisite, inspired film, which opens 29 July at New York's Cinema Village and is available to stream on fandor.com for 24 hours only on this same day. Some will be familiar, like milking cows, driving tractors, sheep-shearing or hanging laundry on the line outside. Others are less well known, as, for instance, John Jones' travels across the county in his yellow mobile library. With each stop, he spends time with each reader, delivering books they've asked for and some they haven't. In turn, he asks about their lives, what's happened in the month since he's last seen them, the heat or the surprising hailstones, what they might know about vegetarian cooking.



Sleep Furiously

Director: Gideon Koppel

Cast: John Jones, Pip Koppel

(Microcinema International and Fandor.com; Cinema Village: 29 Jul 2011; UK theatrical: 29 May 2009 (General release); 2008)

“Blimey,” exults Jones after one chat with an older woman about “the time she was at school,” “It was interesting

In these quiet exchanges, *Sleep Furiously* doesn't quite illustrate the source of its title, Noam Chomsky's example of a sentence that is grammatically correct but nonsensical (“Colourless green ideas sleep furiously”). In these moments, sense—poetic and expansive—can be found in combinations of words and images, a conversation heard from off-screen as the camera watches the book van's narrow door, or as hands appear in tight close-up, holding a book, touching its cover and fingering through its pages. Not infrequently, these combinations are enhanced by the film's Aphex Twin soundtrack, a recurring, delicate piano theme alongside other, vaguely evocative instrumentals.

Koppel was moved to make the film, he says, partly out of his own experience. One of five children born to German Jewish immigrants, he worked on the family farm growing up, the same farm his mother Pip, 78 years old in the film, maintains... with the assistance of her sheepdogs Daisy and Jack. *Sleep Furiously* uses Jones' journeys as a structuring device, long-long shots showing the van's slow progress over distant hills shrouded in mist, or low-angles emphasizing his angular profile as he drives. When a client asks whether he might be taking a vacation sometime, Jones smiles. “Days off? They're very good,” he says, “But the thing is, you get to a routine and you stick to it, you know.”

As the film shows, the beauty of that routine is that it's never exactly the same. Occasional time-lapse imagery shows clouds skittering, curtains flapping, a baby sleeping: time is passing and details are changing. The grain of the 16mm film is sometimes rough, sometimes fluid. No composition is stagnant. Each single scene in the film shows how minutiae matter, and some depend on cuts to make sense: dogs bark frantically off screen, and the edit shows them playing, not frantic but delighted. Children pose for pictures with their teachers, a husband discusses dinner with his wife, and a dog visits the vet. Each frame is separate, but each story is also connected.

Pip is a constant presence, revealed intermittently. She walks with Daisy, her silhouette dark against a rising sun. Or she takes her stuffed owl to a neighbor, hoping to have the branch on which it's been perched cut down. When her pet died, she explains, she followed the taxidermist's instructions, freezing it before she shipped it off by post. They observe the result from multiple angles even as the camera maintains its medium distance, low and discreet. Pip adds, “I think she's fantastic, but I can't fit her into anything. My decision is that's too high.” Thus, her friend the cabinet-maker begins to cut, slowly, a gesture at once preserving and altering the owl that's no longer quite the owl it was.

The film returns again and again to this idea of transition, in a range of forms—seasons change, cows go out to pasture and come in for milking, piglets are born, lambs follow their mothers as dogs herd them. In between these daily tasks,

community members sort through past and present, life and death. At film's start, young children listen to their teacher—Pip—who explains clay: See if you can build the wall going up, and if you get fed up with it going up, you can flatten it and make it go down," she demonstrates, "It does quite a lot of different things, so long as you keep it in the right consistency." A child makes a head, pressing strands of hair through a strainer. Later, a quartet of ladies giggles over photos they've spread before them on a table, remembering sack races and other adults-oriented sports.

During more than one meeting, the community worries about the school being closed, reminded by one man that the council went through a process toward the "official closing of the school." The soundtrack music features an organ, pulsing and dimly discordant, the camera keeps close on his face, as noises off screen indicate his listeners are restless. The change is disconcerting, but it's to be expected. "Keeping going, that's the important thing, isn't it?" Jones shares with another man. "Yeah," comes the answer.

Rating:  10