

# sleep furiously

a film by

Gideon Koppel



35mm 1:1.85 Dolby SR-D 94 minutes colour

Certificate: U

Opens 29<sup>th</sup> May Curzon Soho, Gate Notting Hill, Apollo West End,  
and other London Venues and selected cinemas around the country

sleep furiously

Director	Gideon Koppel
Producers	Margaret Matheson Gideon Koppel
Editor	Mario Battistel
Music	Aphex Twin
Cinematographer	Gideon Koppel
Executive producers	Mike Figgis Serge Lalou
Location sound	Chris King
Camera assistants	John Evans Tasha Back Steven Gardner Ula Pontikos
Production	Kerri Trounce Ross McKenzie Sali Davies
Graphics	why not associates
Supervising sound editor	Joakim Sundström
Re-recoding mixer	Richard Davey

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Wales and with the support of the National Lottery  
through the Arts Council of Wales

Bard Entertainments Ltd and van film ltd

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**sleep furiously** is set in a small farming community in mid Wales, about 50 miles north of Dylan Thomas' fictional village of Llareggub – and there is a sense in which this is a film 'for' Dylan Thomas, if not a contemporary translation of 'Under Milk Wood'. This is a place where Koppel's parents - both refugees - found a home. It is a landscape and population that is changing rapidly as small scale agriculture is disappearing and the generation who inhabited a pre-mechanised world is dying out. Gideon Koppel leads us on a poetic journey into a world of endings and beginnings; a world of stuffed owls, sheep and fire.

## Production notes

**sleep furiously** is set in Trefeurig, a hill-farming community in mid Wales. It is a landscape that is changing rapidly as small-scale agriculture, which characterised the area, is disappearing and the last generation who inhabited a pre-mechanised world is dying out. What was once a community cut off from the world has now learned to adapt to modern times: the quad bike has replaced the pony; the mobile phone has spared people the need to shout across the valley; and exotic creatures like llama are starting to make a claim for residency, alongside sheep. Some of the old traditions and values remain: perhaps most noticeable is the sense of rhythm and pace to life and the strong sense of community amongst the inhabitants. The bond between people has perhaps grown out of the centuries of hardship endured by the farmers and miners who struggled to survive in the austere and isolated landscape. And perhaps it is also a response to that adversity which has generated an extraordinary sense of humanity which typically teeters between the tragic and the comic.

This community and landscape is one that I have a particular relationship with – not least because my parents, both artists and refugees, found a home and a sense of belonging in this beautiful but sometimes harsh environment. For many years I felt a need to make a film here, but my 'ideas' were too lyrical and perhaps too personal for the constructs and polemics demanded by television - still the primary source of documentary funding in UK. That is to say I wanted to make a film that was 'evocative' of Trefeurig rather than 'about' it. I wanted to make a film in which moments of intimacy and human gesture became juxtaposed with the infinite space and time of the landscape, in which the 'aboutness' and story would evolve during the making process.

In order to seek funding for a documentary film which explored my fragmented ideas and associations with this community in mid-Wales, I needed to find a way of translating my more associative ideas into a palatable form - 'a project' that could be recognised by financing bodies and commissioners. In this sense, my idea for a film could only become a 'project' when one afternoon I watched the yellow library van meander down the road on the other side of the valley. I remembered that once a month John Jones drives the library van through the Trefeurig community, from farm to farm, collecting and delivering books. He parks his van in the same spot and is 'visited by one or more members of each household – some people even dressed up in their best to go to the library van. In the back of the van they talked about the books, about the times and reflected on life in the community. The library van was

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both literally and metaphorically a vehicle of stories. It offered a structure, in temporal terms a heartbeat or clock for the film, and a protagonist - John Jones who I thought could become the narrator, linking up all the disparate places and people. The project was then called The Library Van.

One of the stages in developing the project was to make a sketchbook for The Library Van. The UK Film Council funded this film under their 'pilot' scheme, although it was never intended as a trailer, taster or neat synthesis of the proposed feature-length documentary. On the contrary - the aim was to create an antithesis of the proposed film, one in which the inhabitants of the community were isolated from the landscape which is integral to their lives and stories. I wanted to film as many people of the community as possible, each standing against a simple white backdrop, with a light quality and composition reminiscent of Richard Avedon's photographic portraits 'In the American West'. These images were to be portraiture without romanticism or contrived drama – a direct and frank exchange between the subject and the camera revealing the physicality and presence of the characters. Each person was simply asked to present themselves to camera: maybe tell a story, sing a song, talk about an object, a pet... or if they wanted, to remain silent. There were to be no rules. As with the Avedon images, I wanted to provoke a direct eye-line between the camera and the character, so I sat under the lens of the camera. This work was shot on High Definition over a weekend in the local Trefeurig school. We edited the resultant fourteen hours of material quickly and instinctively into a sixty-minute piece. Most striking about the edited sequence was the integral sense of community evoked - a sense of shared values amongst the people, and a common awareness of their immediate environment. I used footage of landscapes shot on super 8mm as a punctuation between groups of the characters. These landscapes are static - the only movement comes from drifting clouds, the rippling of water... . The connection formed between the characters and the silence of their environment has a strong emotional charge.

This relationship between people and the land reminded me of an expression that I had often heard in this part of Wales - that people don't 'own' the land, they 'belong' to it. For me, this suggested that in **sleep furiously** the environment should not emerge merely as a geographic location for peoples' lives, but should have the presence of a character in the film. To achieve that, I needed a visual medium which was sensitive to subtle details of the land: the changes in light, textures, the presence of wind and rain, and cloud patterns. I realised that I needed to shoot on film rather than video. As the gap between film and high definition video formats closes - at least in terms of specification - it is becoming increasingly difficult to justify film over video, particularly for a low budget project which was branded 'documentary'. I argued that if you imagine a video image of a magnificent landscape projected onto a big screen, as a signifier it says 'great landscape' loud and clear, but little else. The same landscape shot on film, may allow the audience to 'fall into'

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the image, to engage with it through their imagination, not simply their powers of recognition. There is also, in the process of working with film rather than video, an inherent sense of the finite. The quantity of film stock is limited, so there is always an acute sensitivity to selecting the 'moment' to shoot; a particular awareness of time and with that the possibilities of compressing and expanding it.

Margaret Matheson and I secured the possibility to shoot **sleep furiously** on 16mm film - which was largely made possible by the generosity of Technicolor, Panavision and Fuji. Margaret fully supported both the decision to work on film and that I should photograph **sleep furiously** myself, despite having only previously operated the camera on a few commercials and sections of documentaries. The duration of the shoot was provisionally scheduled as 6 months but Margaret kept the budget fluid and by the end of that time I was able to trade-off crewing resources (scheduled days with a local sound recordist and camera assistant) with an additional 2 months living in Trefeurig. There was no pattern to the filming while I lived in Trefeurig from June 2006 until February 2007 - most days I would go by myself into the hills and set up a time lapse shot and sit next to the camera watching and listening. Every third Tuesday in the month, when the library van came, I had a crew and we spent the day with John Jones. Documentary has largely been subsumed into a world of television. What was once an idiom of film making is now often conflated by both broadcasters and academics with factual television programme production. That is to say, polemical themes and journalistic structures now prevail over visual observations and lyrical stories. The camera is used more as a recording device, than a kind of microscope which contains, discovers and evokes dynamics of the world that otherwise pass by unnoticed. I had probably been subjected to too many years of television rhetoric: despite having a more associative and evolutionary idiom of film making I found myself, early on in the shoot, despondent at not finding a conventional focus to **sleep furiously**. A liberating moment in the process was a telephone conversation with an American screenwriter friend. The conversation went something like this:

"... I don't know what I am doing... I don't know what the film is about any more, let alone what the story is."

"Koppel - you have been talking about this film for several years. You know what the story is: it is your story."

And then my friend hung up.

Without giving the matter any further thought I went to see my mother and asked if I could film her and her dog Daisy taking their morning walk. I made two further requests - that we did this at six in the morning and that she took a slight detour and walked to my father's grave on the other side of the valley. The following morning the light was bright, pinkish and there was an unusual strong, warm wind. The first image I shot was in her house: the wind was blowing the branches of a tree which in turn created ripples of shadow across a large painting - by my father - of my sister

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Sarah, who drowned when she was a baby. There followed a sequence of images of my mother waking up Daisy and then walking with her through the landscape. She stops to pick up a stone which she places on my father's grave. The final image is a wide landscape with a footpath running horizontally across the bottom of the frame. My mother and her dog appear as tiny and fragile figures as they slowly cross frame on their walk home. In television terms it could be said that nothing happens in this sequence of images and consequently it is about nothing. But for me this was 'a story' - a story about light, the wind, moving shadows... a sense of isolation and vulnerability - all told in simple, but carefully composed images and sounds. Although I was beginning to trust my instinct a little more - an instinct that the story of the film would evolve through an accumulation of short stories or tableaux - I needed some help and reassurance.

At that time I was reading W.G. Sebald's novel 'Austerlitz', a work with many resonances of what might be 'my story': the history of my parents as Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany; a journey which meanders, with a constant sense of 'not knowing', through specific places and landscapes along a spatial trajectory from North Wales to the East End of London – coincidentally, some of the places of my own story. The writings of Sebald led me to read Peter Handke's play 'Kaspar'. The world of Kaspar had a particular resonance with my own feelings of isolation living in Trefeurig, with the inevitable sense of regression living 'at home' after thirty years. I found a strong identification with Kaspar's struggle for language, for words - his cry 'I want to be someone like somebody else once was'. Handke describes 'Kaspar' as a play 'which does not show how it really is or how it really was with Kaspar Hauser, it shows what is possible with someone'. For me Handke's words created a landscape - an internal landscape - which suggested questions about 'belonging...' but without any room for nostalgia or sentimentality. I wrote to Handke, describing the film I was making and asking if I could come to Paris to talk with him about it. One month later, over lunch, eaten in the heat of an early autumn afternoon, we talked. Peter listened to the descriptions of what I had been filming and looked bemused whenever I expressed a doubt in what I was doing - "trust your instinct" he said firmly. We talked about the nature of stories and he pointed me towards his collection 'Once Again for Thucydides'. Each story is an evocation of a moment, place in time and gesture, and each as if, just then, time had stopped and that experience had been looked at under a microscope. Peter's words were and remain very important for me... and the conversations continue.

Each story in **sleep furiously** is played out on a 'stage' that is in part created by the rectangular frame of the camera. The frame isolates a fraction of experienced vision and in doing so the world within the frame then becomes a fiction or an abstraction. That is to say objects which seemed previously unrelated, apparently develop a communion with one another: the sheep and the tree which to the eye are part of a continuum, can become related within a contained composition. Sometimes I would create the frame around an event or activity, but perhaps more often I would create a 'landscape' and wait to see what would happen within it. Being behind the camera

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altered my sensitivity and awareness of the world around me, in effect giving me a particular patience for waiting and watching, allowing things, people, animals, dramas... to unfold and reveal themselves. The expectation of time and the rhythms of these observations became a form of music to me and suggested quite clearly how I needed to approach the editing of this material and the forms of collaboration I was looking for to develop the process.

I worked with the editor Mario Battistel who had edited feature films for John Malkovich and Tran Anh Hung, and is one of the leading commercials editors in France. It was important for me that I worked with an editor who engaged with the images on the screen, was comfortable working without a linear structure, who enjoyed finding rhythmical movements rather than imposing them... and one who had never made television programmes. The editing took place in Paris - it was a deliberate choice to transpose this part of the work to an environment which was removed geographically and culturally from the world of the film. In this 'abstraction' I could attempt to lose the tangible relationships with the images on the screen and could engage with the material more freely. That is to say, I could be less influenced by my relationship with what lay beyond the screen and could respond to the authenticity of the moment, in terms of what was evoked rather than what was illustrated. For instance, the sequence in which we integrated moments from a music lesson in the primary school with graphic images of a tractor turning the cut grass to make hay and then baling it. The tractor was shot in such a way that it looked like a child's toy. The music lesson generated a rhythm of percussive sounds which married with the movement and work of the farmer. Together there is a sense of the two activities of the community being in harmony, a feeling of integrated life. The sequence ends with the music teacher cupping his hand to his ear and looking to the children as if to say listen to the silence. Cut. The valley is filled with silence apart from the sound of the tractor driving away.

The picture editing process sadly lasted for only 8 weeks spread over a 4 month period – a duration and schedule entirely defined by the budget. 'Sadly', because it was a deeply rewarding collaboration and journey. Music was important from the outset – not as an accompaniment, but as the different 'voices' of the key characters. Although I had envisaged the sound to be almost purely the synch sound aided with a few effects, it soon became apparent in the edit that we needed to echo the visual collision between intimate human gesture and the scale of the landscapes. I enjoyed the possibilities of looking out over the valley but hearing only the hum of an off-screen bee in the foreground flowers; or a tiny figure dwarfed by the scale of a hillside, but still present because we hear the sound of their footsteps. We needed the wind and rain to be almost omnipresent in the film, as if constantly hearing the albeit changing sounds of a protagonist's heartbeat and breathing. All this would have been impossible if it were not again for the fluid accountancy of Margaret's budget and the brilliance of the sound supervisor Joakim Sundström. As with the picture editing, the sound work was carried out in 'down time' and spread out over several months.

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**sleep furiously** is set 50 miles further north of Dylan Thomas' fictional village of Llareggub – and there is a sense in which it is a film 'for' Dylan Thomas, if not a contemporary translation of 'Under Milk Wood'. This is a play which I have been familiar with since childhood and which was present in my thoughts at the beginning of the project - from the tragic-comic, a sense of the absurd... right down to the idea of John Jones the library man becoming the narrator of the film. And although I have considered the more personal qualities of **sleep furiously** I would not want to conclude these pages without a clear acknowledgement of the political dynamics of the film, which I hope speak for themselves.

Gideon Koppel April 2008

## Biographies

GIDEON KOPPEL – Producer / Filmmaker

Gideon Koppel grew up in Liverpool, studied mathematics and was a postgraduate student at the Slade School of Fine Art in the Experimental Media Studio. His work as is exhibited in a wide variety of forms: from the film installation for fashion label Comme des Garçons seen at the Florence Biennale... to the controversial and never broadcast BBC film 'Ooh la la and the art of dressing up' which explores the psychopathology of celebrity. Gideon is an award-winning director of film commercials; a faculty member at the University of London and teaches with Theodore Zeldin at l'École des Hautes Études Commerciales (HEC), Paris.

MARGARET MATHESON - Producer

Margaret Matheson is one of the most respected film producers in Britain and has been running her independent production company, Bard Entertainments, since 1993. Prior to Bard Entertainments Margaret was Chief Executive of Island World and a founding director of Zenith Productions Ltd. Her prolific producing credits range from 'Abigail's Party' and 'Scum' to 'Eve's Bayou'... .

MARIO BATTISTEL – Editor

Mario Battistel is based in Paris where he is best known as a commercials editor, working with directors such as Peter Lindberg, Michel Gondry and Frederic Planchon. Mario's feature film credits include 'At the Height of Summer' directed by Tran Anh Hung and John Malkovich's 'The Dancer Upstairs'.

APHEX TWIN – Music

'The Guardian' described Richard James, aka Aphex Twin, as 'the most inventive and influential figure in contemporary electronic music'. His albums include 'Drukqs', 'I Care Because You Do'... .

MIKE FIGGIS - Executive Producer

A film maker and musician - acclaimed for his Academy Award nominated feature 'Leaving Las Vegas', Mike Figgis has an extraordinarily eclectic range of credits from Hollywood studio features such as 'Internal Affairs' to 'The Battle of Orgreave', a collaboration with Turner prizewinning artist Jeremy Deller.

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SERGE LALOU - Executive Producer

Serge Lalou co-founded *Les Films d'Ici* a film production company in 1986. Not only prolific, Serge has developed a reputation as one of the most progressive documentary producers in Europe with credits including BAFTA and César award winning 'Etre et Avoir', 'Calle Santa F'e and the recent sensation at 2008 Cannes Festival 'Waltz with Bashir'.

CHRIS KING - Location Sound

Chris King is a veteran BBC sound recordist with numerous credits on all the flagship documentary series from *Arena* and *Omnibus* to *Timewatch* and *Horizon*.

WHY NOT ASSOCIATES - Graphics

why not associates is a British graphic design company with global reach – collaborating with clients such as Nike, Virgin Records, Tate Modern and the BBC.

Amongst their recent accolades is a BAFTA award nomination for the drama series *Life on Mars* title sequence.

JOAKIM SUNDSTRÖM - Supervising Sound Editor

Joakim Sundström is a regular collaborator of Michael Winterbottom – receiving credits as supervising sound editor on all of his films from 'In This World' through to unreleased 'Genova'. Joakim has accrued a long list of award nominations including a BAFTA for 'The Constant Gardener' and an American Motion Picture Sound Editors award for 'Touching The Void'.

RICHARD DAVEY - Re-recording Mixer

Richard Davey is recognised as being one of the UK's most talented newcomers. Over the last few years he has built up an impressive list of feature film credits including 'The Queen', 'The Road to Guantanamo' and 'The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes' Richard has been nominated for both BAFTA and AFI awards.

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