

'Sleep Furiously' is Landscape, Self-Portrait and a Virtual Tour of the Welsh Countryside All in One

By Christopher Campbell

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There are too many documentaries being made. This is a fact. And as I mentioned in my column on "Tarnation" the other day, much of this has to do with too many people thinking either themselves or other slightly interesting people are deserving of a film. Add to that the issue of there being too many lyrical portraits of locations. Apparently anybody can make a tone poem about their town or somewhere else they find fascinating, and it will probably end up shown at museums and likely screen at the New York Film Festival. But just because they can, should they?

The difference between a film about a person and a film about a place is that setting is always richer than character. This is not a fact so much as a personal observation. Maybe it depends on whether you prefer vacations in which you primarily visit with people or places. Since I'm typically on the side of the latter, I'll always enjoy a documentary like Gideon Koppel's "**Sleep Furiously**," which in part takes us on a tour of a Welsh farming community called Trefeurig.

Something else dividing the two types of subjects has to do with truth and perspective. It's much harder to get away with a film focused on a person that doesn't get to the irrefutable truth of that person. Unless maybe it's a slanted bio of a

politician or involves an extremely personal relationship between the filmmaker and the individual(s). Documentaries showcasing locations can be more about the viewpoint it is seen through than the absolute reality of the space. These works are not often actual fly-on-the-wall experiences, even when directed by Frederick Wiseman, the king of locale portraiture, who is consistently mistaken as an entirely objective filmmaker.

True to form, "Sleep Furiously" is no detached, security-cam look at Trefeurig through the seasons, no more an exact and accurate survey of the community than "The Smurfs" presents a genuine travelogue of New York City. The area was home to Koppel's parents, and his widowed mother remains there with her dog. There is a certain nostalgic romanticization of the place from his and in turn the film's angle. Much of the doc consists of shots of older folk and the traditional way of life there, both of which are on their way out. Similar to "Sweetgrass," this film features a lot of sheep and an overbearing atmosphere of times a changin'.



In the press notes of the doc, Koppel admits that "Sleep Furiously" turned out to be his own story. So it's like "Tarnation," to an extent, though obviously a very different sort of introspection is occurring. But is it possible to capture the essence of a place and at the same time express one's own relationship to it? I have never been to Wales, let alone this particular region, so I may never know how successful it is as balance of self-portrait and landscape. Still, part of what I like about docs such as this is how they transport me to another land. Just as true tourism experiences may be contingent on a guide's perspective, virtual tourism is often likewise, only it's more of a visual matter.

As it turns out, there is a promotional gimmick tied to this film where you can enter a contest to win a trip to Wales. When you get there, will it be as dreary yet laid back, full of sheep and little dogs and foggy mists and rolling hills? I'd like to think Trefeurig would be no more recognizable to viewers of "Sleep Furiously" than a sunny day in Amsterdam would be to those who saw Ivens and Franken's "Rain"

back in 1929. But this doesn't make me accept the film any less as a kind of trip to the Welsh countryside.

Anyone in need of a holiday from the hustle and bustle of either the city or the 21st century? Let Koppel show you around rural Wales.

“Sleep Furiously” opens this Friday in NYC and will be available to stream on Fandor.com for 24 hours only on the same day.

(Koppel's precursing black and white short doc on the same area, “A Sketchbook for the Library Van,” is also available on the site in conjunction with the new release.)