

Landscape

FRAMES of REPRESENTATION

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ICA

Wendy Ide on *Family Life*

This intimate portrait of a de facto family struggling to keep a life together on a run down farm starts with an explosion of emotion.

A wide shot captures three figures, indistinct in the cautious first light of dawn. The man, cowboy hat clamped down on his head, gestures with both fists for emphasis as he rages, demanding to be left alone. The woman and her daughter circle him, alternately pleading for calm and goading the hornet's nest of his fury. And the erratic dogs join in, their barks ricocheting around the gutted buildings of the farmyard. Even with the vast sprawl of frost-blanching fields that surrounds them, the walls are closing in.

The man is Alfred, the woman Biggi. Both survivors of the kind of childhood that leaves livid scars, they were, for a time, in a relationship. Now they are separated but live in adjacent buildings on this barely functioning homestead in Saxony-Anhalt. They are united by the landscape of a common dream, of an American-style ranch, rich with livestock, romance and promise. They have the livestock – four pensive horses and a scattershot rabble of dogs and cats. But the romance and promise is lacking, starved out by debt and hardship. Biggi has two daughters who, after spells in the care system, have returned home. Denise is battling with depression and a self-harm habit; Saskia is restless and rebellious.

The first feature-length documentary from Rosa Hannah Ziegler was shot over the course of a year but the overriding sense is of winter; the sun hangs low in the sky, the branches of the bare trees are as ominous as gibbets. It's a remarkably sensitive piece of filmmaking. Ziegler absents herself from the picture, but the trust she has clearly built up with the family means that each member comes to regard camera as a *con dante*.

Alfred, head buried in his hands, shows a vulnerability to the filmmaker which he jealously guards from the women with whom he lives. And Biggi reveals the shattering sadness which has marked her life and relationships.

The film is produced by, and in the tradition of, the socially engaged and respectful work of the Wendland Film Cooperative. But there is a clear parallel also with the work of the British documentarian Michael Grigsby, who, with films such as *Living on the Edge* (1987), combined an evocative, poetic appreciation for landscape with an empathetic understanding of lives on the margins.