Pole Position

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Anne Aghion, Ice People, 2008, still from a color film in HD, 77 minutes.

ONE OF ANNE AGHION'S go-to images in *Ice People* (2008), her documentary about South Pole scientists, is of tightly lashed tents against a backdrop of towering mountain peaks. When the film's four main subjects—a pair of geologists and their two undergraduate assistants—aren't hunkered down inside these wind-whipped shelters, boiling water and struggling to make small talk, they're digging outside with picks and shovels.

It's an earthbound, stubbornly unromantic depiction of Antarctica's modern-day explorers—the polar opposite, perhaps, of Werner Herzog's Encounters at the End of the World (2007). Herzog saw his subjects as a community of "professional dreamers" who play rock guitar, glide through crystal-blue ocean waters, and tiptoe along the rims of volcanoes. Aghion's take is decidedly less exciting; the most dramatic moment in Ice People comes when the group's most enthusiastic member, Dr. Adam Lewis, uncovers a leaf impression he guesses to be twenty million years old and exclaims, "That's a beauty!"

Aghion does a commendable job letting this frontier land speak for itself. She's not offended, as Herzog is, by the banal mining-town aesthetic of Camp McMurdo, the researchers' base; on the contrary, she embraces its spartan dwellings as part of the atmosphere. And she captures some wonderful images from the community's everyday activities—snowplows working in twenty-four-hour darkness, visible only as globes of light, or a technician flapping his arms to stay warm as he repairs a control tower.

Despite the serious work and the grim surroundings depicted in the film, there's a subtle wit at play in *Ice*People. Aghion cuts between a geologist typing up his findings on a laptop and his reclining, dirt-encrusted partner studying rocks outside like a Cro-Magnon. They're both sitting on layers of freeze-dried history, and when one of them submerges an ancient sprig of moss he's just unearthed in water, it expands like a Chia Pet.

When the film's protagonists talk, it's often about the satisfaction of figuring stuff out. The undergrads are deciding whether this sort of rugged fieldwork is for them; the professors, it's obvious, made their minds up a long time ago. "Now I'm just rocks and tills and glaciers," Lewis says. Although the film never explicitly pronounces him and his colleagues the vanguard in the battle against global warming, the *thump-thump* of their helicopters flying over scree-covered slopes (Antarctica, or Afghanistan?) suggests these devoted "ice people" as that conflict's special forces.

Ice People has its New York theatrical premiere at Anthology Film Archives May 1–7. For more details, click here.