

# The Seattle Times

## "Ice People" examines those at work in forbidding Antarctica

*By John Hartl*

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Despite the success of "The March of the Penguins," IMAX's "Antarctica" and Werner Herzog's current Oscar nominee for best documentary, "Encounters at the End of the World," Antarctica still seems like virgin territory on film.

A new French-American co-production, "Ice People," emphasizes the variety of potential responses to an isolated continent that's both grand and forbidding. Moody, atmospheric and often refreshingly down-to-earth, it's not quite like any previous film about Antarctica.

The director, Anne Aghion, likes to fill the screen with the kinds of lonely landscapes that David Lean once used to suggest another kind of desert. She and her cinematographer, Sylvestre Guidi, are especially fond of pulling back their cameras and demonstrating the scale of the place — and the relative puniness of the scientists who have gathered there for research.

Laurent Petitgand's spare score, which relies mostly on a single guitar, contributes mightily to the impact of several montages. In this context, the sudden use of Microsoft's familiar musical cue, announcing that Windows is ready, sounds downright exotic.

But the filmmakers also focus on things as mundane as a discussion of the dirt that becomes part of your skin when you haven't showered for days and "snotsicles" forming on your nose. The claustrophobic conditions of living together, with people you get to know almost too well, can turn familiarity into a trap.

Politics, religion and the war in Iraq become subjects to be mentioned gingerly. It's better to focus on science and the challenges that brought the team to this place, which they hope will shed light on what happened there millions of years ago.

Whether they're examining fossils and ash layers, or they're wondering about the best spot to witness the eruption of Mount Erebus (which isn't expected to happen for a very long time), they're obsessed with the challenge of finding out just how Antarctica works.

Aghion, who previously made a couple of Rwanda documentaries, doesn't provide a lot of background information about this group, which includes geologists Allan Ashworth and Adam Lewis and two undergraduates. There are moments when you wish she'd stop and explain how certain necessities are handled, but she does a thorough job of suggesting the passions and motivations of these determined polar explorers.