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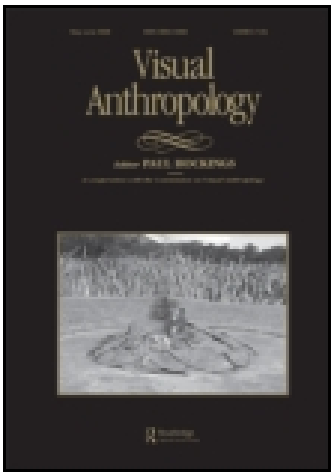

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The Interaction between Visual and Written Ethnography in Subtitling

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DISCUSSION

The Interaction between Visual and Written Ethnography in Subtitling

Jinghong Zhang

This article explores how subtitles are applied in ethnographic film editing. Based upon doctoral research and accompanying films, I will illustrate how the key ideas in the writing could be re-addressed and re-interpreted in the films through certain ways of subtitling. I argue that appropriate subtitling not only presents the individuality of the subjects directly, but also allows the filmmaker to pronounce his/her own voice indirectly, which responds to as well as differs from written anthropology.

Compared with the rich literature in visual anthropology analyzing how ethnographic films have been shot and structured, and exploring the history of ethnographic filmmaking, not much is to be found on the significance of subtitling for ethnographic films. This might in part be because subtitling is still regarded more as a technical practice of transcribing than a way of raising ideas or conceptual reflection; and in part because of the complexity of analyzing the process of subtitling, with a need to query both the source and the target language, and the subtitles in relation to their visual sequences. Here I review a few writings that have raised key points about subtitles, to rethink the role of subtitling for both ethnographic films and related writing.

My reflection on the role of subtitles springs from two major insights of the ethnographic filmmaker and visual anthropologist David MacDougall. On the relationship between ethnographic writings and ethnographic films he has pointed out that the latter should not simply be regarded as an addition to the writing but must go beyond it, creating new knowledge and open for interpretation [Barbash and Taylor 1996]. As for the role of subtitles in ethnographic filmmaking, he has argued that there is more to subtitling than just the technical aspects: importantly, it is a process of presenting ideas and creating new interpretations [MacDougall 1998]. Following these insights, taken up in more detail later,

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I want to explore the interaction between visual and written ethnography through the way in which subtitles have been applied in editing ethnographic film.

This arises from my own experience of writing a thesis in the anthropological discipline while making accompanying ethnographic films [Zhang 2011]. Conventionally films have been considered better at narrating but worse at arguing than writing is. Thus I will illustrate how some key ideas in my writing could be re-addressed and re-interpreted in the films through the way in which they are subtitled. In particular, I will analyze how this becomes possible in the process of cross-language negotiation, namely the transcribing and translating from a source language (Chinese) into the target language (English) during subtitling.

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FILMS: NEW KNOWLEDGE BEYOND TEXTS

I examined how Puer tea, a large-leaf tea originating in my home area of Yunnan, was packaged by various actors into a fashionable drink in 21st-century China [Zhang 2011]. When I first decided to make a film, the purpose was to illustrate the social and physical landscape of tea production and visualize people's sensory experiences in tea consumption. The video, I thought, would also efficiently support my thesis, which was written in English, my second language, and one in which I might not be able to express my ideas fully.

My 2007 fieldwork was mainly in two places: Yiwu, a village in southern Yunnan that borders Laos and is famous for Puer tea production; and Kunming, the provincial capital, a tea consumption site and the most important distribution center for Puer tea in southwest China. In order to trace the social life of this tea I used film to record scenes of how Puer tea was produced and traded in the rural area and how it was consumed and appreciated in urban tea-houses.

When to film and when not to is a question that forever challenges a filmmaker; more so if he or she wants to collect information for both writing a monograph and making a film. When all sorts of fresh events happened in the field sites every day, I was wondering how to observe and talk to people—with camera or without. For a while I thought I was too ambitious, and felt it would be better to focus on one thing.

It is not only a matter of time to collect material for both writing a thesis and making films but that demands two kinds of thought simultaneously. I agree with David MacDougall [Barbash and Taylor 1996: 372–373] that the knowledge used for ethnographic writing, which he ascribes to the ''theoretical domain,'' could differ from that used for ethnographic filming, which belongs to the ''experiential domain.'' He suggests that if one starts to make a film one has to make a shift in thinking, ''from a word-and-sentence-based anthropological thought to an image-and-sequence-based anthropological thought.'' MacDougall doesn't take film as a simple illustration for texts [Grimshaw and Papastergiadis 1996; MacDougall 2006]; nor does he regard film as just a supplement to texts. He recognizes it as being constructed with a different style of thought, one that can provide new knowledge beyond the texts; and compared with ethnographic writing, with narrative and argument dominated by the author, film gives more freedom for interpretation to the audience.

Following these insights, I gave up the idea of using film simply to prove something that would be written in the thesis, or using the camera as a visual

notebook for writing, and instead chose to film when I felt it might be good to tell something through video rather than text. I finally made seven short films that were submitted together with the thesis: each shows a different tea event or draws a portrait of a different character or family. Initially I did attempt to use both writing and film to approach similar content and themes about Puer tea, but finally found that films offer new knowledge going beyond the text. They have their own rhetoric; their own logic of narration, and as a result display something the text does not.

For example, the film *Twice Puer Tea in Hong Kong* [Zhang 2010c] works with one of my thesis sections, ''Aged Puer Tea.'' The written section tells that it is the appreciation of aged Puer tea by connoisseurs, such as those in a tea-house in Hong Kong, that has resulted in the popularity of visiting the rural tea production areas by urban people in recent years. The related film, apart from displaying how connoisseurs tasted the aged Puer tea, tells another short story: after tasting the aged tea, the master of the tea-house, to all the other participants' surprise, suddenly asks the person who owned the aged tea to leave it at his tea-house for display, so that the tea-house can function like a tea museum. This story is not included in my thesis, as it would be an unnecessary distraction and make the written section overloaded; but I felt that film needs such distraction, just as in life there arise all sorts of unexpected events. And such distraction, as long as it doesn't cause broad confusion, provides rich contexts and new knowledge for understanding how Puer tea is appreciated. In my thesis instead, several sentences that summarize the increasing price of aged Puer tea play a similar role, but in a very different way. Though drawing the picture of how the tea's value is highly appreciated by connoisseurs, texts provide ''descriptive, structural and explanatory knowledge,'' whereas films provide ''affective knowledge,'' as MacDougall points out [Barbash and Taylor 1996: 372–373].

As another example, when I screened *Visiting Yiwu, Tasting History* [Zhang 2010d], audience responses showed how differently writing and film could affect understanding of the same subject. In both, I explored how some actors cared very much about the history and culture of Puer tea, and how that tea was not only good for tasting but also good for knowing about. One viewer had read my thesis before watching the film and commented that the film had a more sarcastic flavor than the writing. Perhaps this was partly due to the disadvantage of my writing in a second language; however, it could be attributed to the different forms of narration of the text and film. Even if written in my native language, the text might not necessarily have been able to convey the same sarcastic flavor as the film did.

SUBTITLING: MORE THAN A TECHNICAL TRANSCRIBING

Just as film may offer new knowledge beyond any associated writings, subtitling can also help with creating spaces for new interpretation. The question of the relationship between ethnographic film and reality has developed from asking whether a film reflects the truth, to analyzing the process by which a film has constituted the truth [Morin 1988]. And according to MacDougall [1998], subtitling is

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the last procedure in making a film that constitutes and interprets the reality. He argues that it is with subtitling that the subjects in ethnographic films gain individuality and personal identity, and their ''intellectual life'' can be more directly presented for the audience.

Subtitling for ethnographic films seems like a hard task, mostly because each film requires cross-language ability as well as conveying ideas cross-culturally. Usually the filmmaker is native to or familiar with one of the languages but less familiar with or knows nothing about the other. So translating and transcribing challenge filmmakers not only linguistically but also with cultural barriers. Yet it is the difficulty of translation that encourages the creativity of the filmmaker, and it is through the creative process of translation and transcription that new meanings and interpretations for the film are developed. In the subtitling a new interpretation can challenge the filmmaker's creative wisdom beyond just language or technical ability.

Both David MacDougall [1998] and Paul Henley [2009] have suggested many useful guidelines for subtitling these films. Basically, the subtitles should be readable within a restricted time, and meanings in the target language should be as close to those in the source language as possible. Both authors stress ''selection,'' that is, choosing the most salient phrases for subtitling. On the one hand, one can't and doesn't need to translate every word said in the source language, because too full translations can make the subtitles complex or ambiguous: viewers can't be reading all the time. On the other hand, MacDougall and Henley stress ''selection'' to show how subtitling becomes a creative process. MacDougall [1998: 167] describes this process as ''a chain of translations'' which starts from a rough translation, then moves to refining words and phrases for adjustments and re-adjustments at various stages, and these selected terms are used for an ''imaginative interpretation'' [*ibid*.]. According to Henley [2009: 2], although translation inevitably causes divergence from the original meaning, the meanings in the target language can be made as close as possible to those in the source language only if selected terms retain ''the original flavor.''

Here I insert an example. In one of my films [Zhang 2010b] a joke is played on Mr. Yan, the main character, by his friends. These men put a smiling photo of Yan into the computer and, using digital techniques, merged his smiling face with that in the famous painting of the ''Mona Lisa.'' One of them made a joking comment that can be literally translated as: ''Look! How seductive his eyes are!'' (多媚啊，看他那个眼神). In a literal translation some of the humor here would be lost. The key word in this sentence is ''seductive,'' *mei* (媚) in Chinese. Discussing this with Judith MacDougall, who supervised my work in Canberra, we tried to replace ''seductive'' with alternatives such as ''charming'' or ''attractive'' but felt that none of them could have the original flavor. Finally we replaced not just one word but changed the whole sentence to something more colloquial: ''He's giving us a real come-on!'' This is a colloquial term that I would never find in a dictionary, and it has the additional nuance of sexual innuendo. And the verb ''giving'' in English has a very similar flavor to that in Chinese. In Chinese, *mei* is an adjective, but it potentially refers to a certain charming expression expressed by one's eyes that calls others' attention, hence a combination of an action (''give'') and its object (''come-on''), as the chosen English translation does.

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Both David MacDougall and Paul Henley mention the need not only for condensation but also for certain redundancies or additions. As MacDougall [1998: 168] points out, the same spoken word may have positive or negative meanings depending upon context; and a filmmaker has to make it clear what he understands a certain word should mean by selecting certain terms in the subtitles that ''recontextualize'' the meanings. One strategy mentioned by Henley [2009: 11–12] is to use ''additions,'' to add words when necessary, even if they were not actually spoken,[1] or to use ''subtractions,'' cutting out certain words to make the meanings more clear and accurate. According to Henley, redundancies can be important sometimes if applied in order to gain meaning.

These methods seem to be slight adjustments but actually bring important changes to the meaning and have great influence on how a film announces its themes. In this regard subtitling, like other choices applied in the film editing—such as the choice of a certain sequence of shots, or a certain length for one shot—helps to raise ideas in a film in an indirect way rather than in a more didactic way. In the next section I want to use more examples to exemplify how subtitles work in this way, and in particular how selected words in subtitling can re-address certain themes from the related ethnographic writing.

SUBTITLES: RE-ADDRESSING THE THEMES OF THE WRITING

David MacDougall [2006] stresses that ethnographic film creates reality in a different way than ethnographic writing. Speaking from the experience of writing a thesis as well as making films, I feel that this also presents different ways of arguing. In academic writing, the ethnographic narrative is ultimately for supporting the argument, and one has to state that argument clearly, either at the beginning or the end of the text. I feel that with ethnographic film one is allowed more freedom to choose whether and how to argue. Usually it is said that films are better at narrating, but worse at arguing than academic writing; but in fact a good film does convey certain important ideas or themes, even if not in a straightforward statement. The use of the ''voice of god'' style of didactic voice-over commentary, ubiquitous half-a-century ago, has been increasingly rejected by filmmakers, as many prefer to express opinions in an indirect way, by the choice of shots to create a certain sequence or in choosing a certain length for a scene. And since the 1970s, subtitling for ethnographic films has gradually been accepted by documentary filmmakers. With subtitles, films found a way to present the individuality of the subjects as well as a way for the filmmakers to examine complex concepts [MacDougall 1998]. But due to the nature of visual representation, the ideas and themes raised in films may not be fixed and conclusive but remain multiple and divergent, depending upon diverse understandings of the viewers; and that is why MacDougall says that films are open for new interpretation [Barbash and Taylor 1996; Grimshaw and Papastergiadis 1995].

In my dissertation I followed three main themes: (*1*) how the taste of Puer tea, along with its relevant cultural history, was appreciated by many in the urban environment; (*2*) how the production mode of Puer tea had changed in rural areas by the intensifying demand of the outside market; and (*3*) how the desire of many to find and define the authenticity of Puer tea had been challenged.

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Surrounding these three themes was a larger sociocultural context: despite people's desire to find authentic Puer tea, fake products were abundant, and so there existed various standards for defining Puer tea. I argue that the unavailability of authentic Puer tea had been profoundly shaped by the Chinese *jianghu* (江湖, literally ''rivers and lakes'' and hence ''swordsmen culture''), in which its actors are always in debate and can't tolerate one another, so rely on individual judgments rather than any formal regulation.

''Authenticity'' and *jianghu* are the two key concepts explored in my thesis. When I started editing film I had given up on interpreting these concepts with film, as I didn't think film could have this ability until I began subtitling. I did a rough translation first, and with Judith MacDougall's help further refined these translations in understandable English and got them as close to the original meanings as possible. (The source language is Chinese and the target language is English.) And then I needed to decide the starting and ending points for each subtitle: whether or not to add a comma, or dot, or ellipsis dots, and whether the text should go onto one line or two. Then it became necessary to further adjust the selected terms and the sequence of sentences. It was in this process of many refinements, and with Judith's questioning and suggesting, that I realized that some subtitles were in fact addressing and interpreting certain themes of my thesis; and some words or terms became what I call ''the textual eyes of the video'' that respond to the parallel key concepts in the written thesis. Here are some examples.

Example 1: Additional Authenticity

In the film *Authentic Tea* [Zhang 2010a] I try to draw the portrait of a tea trader, Wen, who comes to Yiwu every harvest season to collect basic tea leaf. Due to the increasing fame of Yiwu's Puer tea many fake products emerged and challenged the ability of consumers and traders, including Wen, to correctly identify the real thing. By fake, I mean either using tea leaf from other regions to adulterate Yiwu tea, or using leaf from terraced tea bushes to adulterate those taken from forest tea trees. ''Forest tea'' implies a good eco-system, better after-taste, and a higher price; whereas with terraced tea pesticide or fertilizer may have been applied, hence a lower quality and lower price. Among the various tea traders I had met, Wen had the strictest standard for the authenticity of Yiwu's Puer tea. As much as possible he must make sure the forest tea leaf and terraced leaf were kept separate for processing; and he strongly resisted using leaf from other regions to blend with or adulterate Yiwu's. All his efforts in building good relationships with the locals were in order to get authentic Yiwu leaf. Once he guided some of his customers from Guangdong to visit one Yiwu sub-village called Gaoshan, where he had been collecting the basic leaf from several local families. When the head of one family took out a bag of leaf for a look, Wen explained to his customers: ''Look, forest tea of Gaoshan!'' This is a literal translation; but understanding what Wen actually wanted to stress to his customers, I made the subtitle to read, ''Look, authentic Gaoshan forest tea!''

The business relationship was like this: Wen collected the basic leaf from this local family and then took it to town for fine production that compressed the leaf into a caked form, and finally he sold this caked Puer tea to these customers from

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Guangdong. Wen's comment actually wanted to convey one important point to his customers: the Puer tea cakes he sold them were made of exactly the same authentic leaf as the local family was displaying. As Paul Henley [2009] has pointed out, additional information might be added in the subtitles to help with understanding the context. In the source language, the meaning of ''authenticity'' was expressed only through Wen's speaking tone. By adding a word ''authentic,'' it becomes clearer in the English subtitles what Wen wanted to indicate. Later on in the film, the customers asked Wen some questions when visiting the tea-growing sites. Likewise, I added ''authentic'' to show what Wen wanted to stress:

Customer: Are these what are called the ''ancient tea trees?''
Wen: Yes, these are the authentic tall tea trees of Yiwu.
(Literally: ''Yes, these are the so-called tall tea trees of Yiwu'')

As well as the title of the film, *Authentic Tea*, the added word ''authentic'' helps with understanding what type of tea-trader Wen was, what kind of ideals he had, and what strategies he applied to indicate to his customers his knowledge and way of doing business. Furthermore, these repeated words become an echo to my thesis which describes how people sought authentic Puer tea while this ideal was being much challenged. I added ''authentic'' or ''authenticity'' at several places in this film, in similar situations. These additional and repeated words highlight how ''authenticity'' has become the key word in understanding the film as well as the written dissertation.

Example 2: ''No Processing'' and ''No Interpretation''

In the film *Visiting Yiwu, Tasting History* [Zhang 2010d], I followed a research group doing investigations in Yiwu. They wanted to publish a book on the authentic history of Yiwu's Puer tea. Many such books had been published before but many, according to this group, were full of false information, just as fake Puer tea products flourished in the market. I observed one of their leaders, Bin, conducting interviews with local people. I saw how he had run into difficulties in identifying the real history of Yiwu's Puer tea, just as I had experienced myself. Their story that I filmed became a kind of mirror for me to reflect upon my own confusion and research situation. And through this film I intended to show how some people cared very much about history as an important element in judging Puer tea's taste, and also how that history had become so complex that it was beyond anybody's ability to verify one version. I also did an interview with Bin. But when I made English subtitles for what he had said, I found that the transcribing of several words and terms became so important that, if they were properly translated, they would convey exactly my own confusions and dilemmas, Bin's ideals and resolutions, and would also re-address and re-interpret the key ideas in my thesis. Here is one example from my interview with Bin:

Myself: What you are collecting is oral history . . .
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another something else.

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How will you deal with that?
Bin: My strategy is NO processing,
NO interpretation...
...just use the raw material...
...and let the audience enjoy
processing it by themselves.

In Bin's answer, the words I had carefully chosen are: ''processing,'' ''raw'' and ''interpretation.'' In my question, I asked how Bin would ''deal with'' (*chuli* in Mandarin, 处理) the complex oral history. His answer in literal translation is ''no dealing'' or ''do nothing.'' He said this twice. The first time, I transcribed it as ''no processing": ''processing'' has a similar meaning to ''dealing with.'' More importantly, we were talking about tea, and in my film as well as the thesis there is a lot about how Puer leaf is processed, and I used relevant terms such as ''rough processing'' and ''fine processing.'' So ''no processing'' creates a metaphor, and makes a good link between attitudes towards both history and tea. It also echoes the next sentence ''...just use the raw material...'' ''Raw material'' has double meanings, too. It refers to the ''original material about the history'' (literal translation for that sentence) as well as the basic leaf for producing Puer tea. Using ''processing'' and ''raw material'' in the subtitles indicates Bin's twofold ideals: discovering the very authentic history of Puer tea and also substantiating the authentic Puer tea products that are made from the authentic raw leaf without additives. Furthermore, this implies depending upon one's own identifying ability rather than being guided by commercial propaganda, as the following comments of Bin indicate: ''...enjoy processing it by themselves.'' These key words clarify the desire of these Puer tea actors; and it also corresponds to the characteristics of the Puer tea actors in *jianghu* (see above) who resist being directed and cheated by others and seeking to resolve any difficulties by self-help.

But when Bin mentioned ''no dealing'' the second time, I transcribed it as ''no interpretation.'' For those audiences not familiar with my research and the tea, they may not be able to sense immediately the metaphoric meanings of ''processing,'' so I took the opportunity to transcribe the phrase as something similar but newly worded. And ''no interpretation'' could convey what Bin said about his strategy of dealing with historical data: to use the informants' original words, not adding his own subjective ideas, and not judging whether the collected sayings were the absolute truth or not.

Later on Bin talked about the reasoning for his ''no processing'' and ''no interpretation.'' The key sentences he said were: ''...Puer tea is like a *jianghu*... it's too chaotic...'' As I have mentioned, *jianghu* is one of the key concepts discussed in my thesis. It was good that Bin mentioned it and made this key word appear in the film. No doubt it is far beyond the scope of the film to explain what this Chinese concept means; but the film did interpret the meaning and the context of *jianghu* in another way: apart from using some scenes to show how some Puer tea actors were in endless debate and why issues surrounding Puer tea became so complex, the film interprets the concept *jianghu* by applying selected key terms in the subtitles, for example, ''propaganda,'' ''original (origins)'' and ''authentic,'' ''misled'' and ''blindfolded'':

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Bin: There has been too much propaganda,
people have been misled.
Our goal is to demonstrate
the basic origins to the public.
...
Many have been blindfolded.
I always felt this.
Many things aren't like
what some traders put out.
I want to convey something
more authentic.
...
I'd rather offer more original
information than direct them.
Let them decide
What they like on their own.

Most of these key words are not from a literal translation, although their basic meanings are close to the source language. They highlight the meaning the speaker wanted to indicate on the one hand, and the context that I wanted to explain on the other. Furthermore, they correspond to the key words used in my thesis to interpret *jianghu* and authenticity. Of course film can never *replace* writing to explain these concepts and themes, but in its own way, and at certain moments, the film subtitles help to bring out the crucial points of both the film and the writing, and the film interacts with the writing by sharing a common emphasis. Again, subtitling is more than technical transcribing, and needs repeated processing and interpretation, just the opposite to Bin's strategy of ''no processing'' and ''no interpretation.''

CONCLUSION

In this article I have followed David MacDougall's insights and used my own experience to discuss the relationship between ethnographic writing, film and subtitles. The emphasis has been on the role of subtitling in ethnographic films, in particular in making films interact with parallel writing. On the one hand subtitles, along with other elements of filmmaking, help an ethnographic film to interpret the reality in a way very different from that achieved in ethnographic writing. On the other hand, ''processed'' subtitles, existing as textual forms within the film, became the ''textual eyes'' of the film and hence re-address and re-interpret the main themes present in the written thesis.

The difficulty of subtitling ethnographic films lies in the cross-language and cross-cultural translation and transcription. It is well known how difficult it is to convey the nuanced meanings in the source language in the target language, using subtitles. However, it is just this difficulty that opens up creative spaces in the writing of subtitles. By applying certain strategies to refine them, such as using additions or subtractions, or emphasizing key terms, subtitling makes it possible for the film to clarify contexts and stress themes that could

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be impossible to understand from a literal translation. The refined subtitles not only present the unique individuality of the people seen in the film but allow the filmmaker an indirect voice, responding to yet differing from the written anthropology.

Of course one might say that I have exaggerated the role of subtitling, and that in watching a film it takes only a few seconds for a line of subtitle to be read. Some might not be able to sense such rich meaning as I have sketched above; nor can they tell whether those meanings re-address the themes of the writing. This could all be true. As David MacDougall has said, ''Subtitled films exaggerate the importance of speech in social life. That is part of the price we pay for them'' [Barbash and Taylor 1996: 379]. My purpose in exaggerating—if indeed it was exaggerating—is to stress that subtitling these films does require creativity, contextualization, and can be linked to the themes of both the film and writing. The duty of the filmmaker is to make the film as understandable as possible, but leave enough spaces for the viewers to have their own interpretation, including that of the subtitles.

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NOTE

1. *Editor's note*. An example: in *The Village*, a film about an Irish village made in the observational style [McCarty and Hockings 1968], there is a scene where several men are digging into an earthen bank. They find nothing at all, but the scene reflects a significant economic activity. Only by adding the subtitle, ''Dig the rabbit out from there,'' did all become clear. That thought was on everyone's mind, yet nobody actually uttered these words during the shot.

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