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Time Travel as Living History

Exploring the Media Representation and Sensual Experience of Historical Everyday Life

Abstract

Audiovisual time travel is not restricted to fiction productions, for it can also be found in non-fiction programming. When the Living History format appeared on the international television market in the early 2000s, it was already an established practice in museum education. A group of volunteers travel back in time to a historical period. They act and learn, fail and succeed, not only for themselves but also for the viewers. The programmes are based on the coupling of past and present: during the time-travel experiment the volunteers remain people of their own time and reflect on the historical living conditions from today's perspective. This article explores the nature of time travel within Living History and how everyday life, values, and norms of the present as well as images of the past are discussed within this framework. Contemporary ideas of historical life have expanded and changed with each representation and interpretation. So, does time travel take place only in our imagination of the past? And what effect does it have on the present? The following productions are analysed here: The 1900 House (Channel4, GB 1999), Frontier House (PBS/Channel4, US 2002), Schwarzwaldhaus 1902 – Leben wie vor 100 Jahren (SWR, DE 2001).

Keywords

Living History, Reality-TV, Time Travel, Utopia

Biography

Monika Weiß is a scholar of media studies at the Philipps University of Marburg and editor of the television studies blog *fernsehmomente.blog*. Her doctoral thesis was published as *Living History. Zeitreisen(de) im Reality TV* (Marburg: Schüren, 2019). Her research focuses on television, video platforms, streaming (analysis, theory, history), gender media studies, and media education.

Time travel is not restricted to fictional audiovisual programming, for it is also found in fact-based productions. When the Living History format appeared on the international television market in the early 2000s, it was already established practice in museum education, conveying knowledge

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through emotional engagement, sensory experience, and entertainment. Nils Kagel defines Living History as experience-oriented mediation of historical processes aided by interpreters who acquire special knowledge about the period depicted. By performing that knowledge, they pass it on to museum visitors. Accordingly, Living History as found in living museums simulates everyday life through presentation, immersion, and experimentation.[1] Adapted for television, Living History is a form of performative Reality-TV, in which protagonists are removed from their everyday lives to experience non-ordinary events that affect their reality. The "container shows" Big Brother (RTL7, NL 1999)[2] and I'm a Celebrity … Get me out of here! (ITV, UK 2002)[3] are examples. The reality that they portray is a television reality that is constructed, because during production and post-production the real-life experience breaks down and the events become a televisual narrative: framing, camerawork, editing, and montage along with the usual voice-over commentary structure a storyline that does not reflect what actually happened.[4] They use the established patterns of Reality-TV and mix the stylistic elements of fictional series with those of non-fictional documentaries. Staging and presentation always frame the viewer's perception.[5]

Living History formats are set up similarly: participants leave their everyday lives and perform in a specially designed isolated space for the entire production. The main differences between programmes such as Big Brother, on one hand, and Living History formats, on the other, are that only the former involves competition or audience intervention and only the latter involves time travel. In Living History programmes a group of volunteers travel back in time to a historical period. They act together to gain experience; they are not working against each other. They re-experience past lives for themselves and also for those watching the show. They are not acting – or at least acting is not welcome – but instead explore a historical life as themselves. The productions are based on the connection between history and present life. During the time-travel experience they reflect the historical living condi-

1 Kagel 2008, 9; also Hochbruck 2008, 24.

2 Big Brother is an international Reality-TV format that has been aired in around 70 countries since its launch in the Netherlands in 1999 (RTL 7).

3 I'm a Celebrity … Get me out of here! is also an international Reality-TV format. It first aired in the United Kingdom in 2002 (ITV) and has since then been launched in eleven countries, including Germany and the United States.

4 Reichertz 2011, 231–232.

5 Weiß 2019, 56.

tions from today's perspective. Self-experience connects with the non-experienced past on the basis that it is possible to (co-)experience historical life, but always with reference to an understanding of the historical life that has changed over time with each new interpretation. So, these time travellers arrive in a past as imagined today.[6] The history presented is a symbolic world of meaning[7] that has less to do with the real past than with ideas about it.

But how is time travel staged in the Living History programmes? How are their timelines constructed? And how are the subjective experiences of these non-fictional journeys related to current images of past daily life? To explore these questions, the following formats are analysed here: The 1900 House (Channel4, GB 1999), Schwarzwaldhaus 1902 – Leben wie vor 100 Jahren (SWR, DE 2001), and Frontier House (PBS/Channel4, US 2002). In all these programmes a family or families are transported back in time: the Bowler family experience English domestic life in London around 1900, the Boro family from Berlin run a farm in the Black Forest in 1902, and the Clunes, Glenns, and Brookses live like homesteaders on the Montana frontier in 1880.

The Time Travel Begins …

In all three formats the journey through time is already constructed in the opening credits, where keywords such as "time machine" or "go back in time" are used in the voiceover. There are also references to bygone eras and the passage of time, such as "life on the frontier" or "back 100 years". Each voiceover also alludes to the men, women, and children of today who are brave enough to participate in the experiment. It also mentions what they have to give up, such as a fridge, the Internet, or running water.[8] The time travel is also visualised by a montage of images. In the opening credits of

6 Fenske 2007, 86.

7 Berek 2009, 162.

8 Opening voiceover of The 1900 House, episode three, 00:00:06–00:00:29: "Meet the Bowler family: Royal Marine Paul, School Inspector Joyce, 11-year-old twins Ruth and Hilary, Kathryn sixteen, and 9-year-old Joe. They volunteer to go back in time. To wash, dress, eat, and live every intimate detail of English domestic life in The 1900 House." The voiceover in Schwarzwaldhaus 1902, 00:00–00:30: "The Kaltwasserhof in the Münstertal. Not a normal Black Forest farm, but a time machine. Here, the Boro family from Berlin is transported back in time. Back 100 years. To the year 1902. To a life without cars, without a fridge, without the Internet. Only four generations removed and yet as foreign as an unreachable planet."

Fig. 1: The Boro family in front of their house in Berlin, before the time travel. Film still, Schwarzwaldhaus 1902 – Leben wie vor 100 Jahren (SWR, DE 2001), episode one, 00:00:15.

Fig. 2: The Boro family in front of the Black Forest farm, dressed in traditional costume. Film still, Schwarzwaldhaus 1902 – Leben wie vor 100 Jahren (SWR, DE 2001), episode one, 00:00:21.

Schwarzwaldhaus 1902, they take the form of time-lapse shots that show the seasons changing and a clock running backwards. Together with the clothing of the Boro family, who move into the Black Forest farm around 1900, they establish both the constructed step back in time and the historical setting (figs. 1 and 2).

The Boro family are first shown dressed in their everyday clothes and standing in front of their house in Berlin. Then they appear in front of their new home dressed in traditional Black Forest clothing. A similar transformation also takes place for the family in The 1900 House. After the Bowlers have been shown in their own living room, they appear one by one in front of the camera as they enter a passe-partout that reinterprets the frame of

Fig. 3: The Bowler family in their living room before travelling back in time. Film still, The 1900 House (Channel4, GB 1999), episode two, 00:01:29.

Fig. 4: The Bowler family entering the passe-partout to start their time travel. Film still, The 1900 House (Channel4, GB 1999), episode two, 00:01:29 / episode three, 00:00:09.

the television screen as an anachronistic picture frame (figs. 3–4). The Boro and Bowler families have each assumed their historical roles and present themselves to the audience.

Frontier House opens with a cinemascope shot. Clouds, shadows, and light move across a deserted land in fast motion. The images suggest that times change, but nature does not, remaining powerful and seemingly untameable. The camera then pans down from the sky to a small wooden cabin and people dressed in period costume (fig. 5): the construction of the American frontier myth is revealed to the viewer. More than for the other two programmes the opening shot for this programme refers to existing media characterisations of a society of the past.

Fig. 5: The participants in historical clothing. Film still, Frontier House (PBS/Channel4, US 2002), episode two, 00:00:09.

Reference to the Western genre in film, television series, and other forms is taken up in the voiceover: "Fictionalised, mythologised, often romanticised".[9] A promise that this production will be different follows: it will show "the real experience of life on the frontier". Morphing images of the volunteers appear, from a first image that shows the physical state in which they began their journey through time to a final image from the end of the journey, when they are wearing worn-out clothes and exhausted by their efforts (figs. 6–8). The interesting part for viewers lies between the first and last images – where they will participate via television.

But Living History also refer to the past in other ways. Deeply rooted modern ideas of the past appear, visualised and confirmed by the buildings in which the productions take place: a typical Black Forest farmhouse in the German programme, a Victorian house in the British programme, and the wooden cabins of frontier settlers in the US programme. In this way, the locations are

9 Intro, Frontier House, episode two, 00:00:30–00:00:37.

not only established, but also made historical. The houses used are always from the period in which the time travellers are situated. They are neither replicas nor purpose-built containers of the type Reality-TV viewers are familiar with from Big Brother, for example. Living History formats use the history of the relevant building to restore it to its original form.[10] The first episodes show the transformation of both the houses and the participants. In Frontier House the participants themselves construct the cabins, living in tents while they do so, similar to the frontier settlers. A parallel montage shows the families in bootcamp, being prepared for their everyday life in the past, instruction that legitimises the location, the action, and the materials. In that way the audiovisual construction is able to create an authentic sense of historical setting and atmosphere. It is evident that the intention is to explore the past as a "secondary reality".[11] The focus is on the construction of historical everyday life as media experience – and entertainment.

Figs. 6 to 8: Morphing images of the volunteers. Film stills, Frontier House (PBS/Channel4, US 2002), episode two, 00:00:11; 00:00:13; 00:00:15.

Historical Life as a Bodily Experience

The volunteers grow into their historical roles. They start as clueless visitors but acquire more and more knowledge. This learning, which holds the audience, is the central narrative of this format. At the beginning, the families

10 Weiß 2019, 69–70.

11 Schörken 1995, 13.

fail in their tasks. The viewers suffer with them as they worry and struggle but are happy to see that they become more and more successful as they gain command of everyday historical practices. Their sympathies with the participants grow. Neither teachers nor omniscient, the participants present, explain, and reflect on their experiences. As they remain people of the present, they are a link to the audience's own everyday life. The viewer is shown that the protagonists are not actors and that the entire content is not fictional, an "authenticity effect" that gives the programmes the factual character typical of Reality-TV.[12]

The bodies of the participants experience historical everyday life, learning, for example, physical actions and social behaviours. They participate in personal hygiene practices, including the use of chamber pots and outhouses, and in the entertainment of around 1900.[13] They carry out hard physical labour but relax on furniture that is not as comfortable as today, which makes rest periods less restful, with hard mattresses and heavy sheets a particular challenge. The first episode of Schwarzwaldhaus 1902 contains many references to the Boro family's physical, bodily experiences. At the beginning, in particular, they are unable to handle the daily work on the farm without any modern technical equipment. The cameras often focus on their working bodies, showing the effort it takes to look after the animals, muck out the stables, harvest the hay, and pull the heavy carriages – all while wearing unfamiliar shoes and heavy woollen clothes. The effort is underlined by close-ups of suffering and sweating faces. And hard work is accompanied by tiredness. Family members are often shown with their heads on the table or in the courtyard looking for somewhere to rest. When one daughter lies exhausted on the farm bench (fig. 9), the voiceover comments that she has only been up for three hours but would like to go straight back to bed.[14] This combination of tough agricultural work and the participants' exhaustion demonstrates the great physical load.[15]

Another focus is on doing the laundry, where the clash between present and past habits is very evident. In all this programming, the voice-over narration emphasises the difference between the past and the present,

12 Faulstich 2008, 138.

13 Fenske 2007, 97.

14 "Sie sind erst seit drei Stunden auf den Beinen, würden aber am liebsten ins Bett gehen. Nur ein paar Augenblicke Schlaf"; episode one of Schwarzwaldhaus 1902, 00:25:22–00:26:30.

15 Weiß 2019, 124.

Fig. 9: A short rest on the courtyard bench. Film still, Schwarzwaldhaus 1902 – Leben wie vor 100 Jahren (SWR, DE 2001), episode one, 00:26:29.

Fig. 10: Staging manual laundry work. Film still, The 1900 House (Channel4, GB 1999), episode one, 00:44:01.

pointing out that previously laundry had to be done by hand, whereas today washing machines do the job in no time. In episode two of The 1900 House the voiceover explains that Joyce, mother and housewife in the Bowler family, spends more than twelve hours doing laundry with her two daughters, a job that would take a modern machine about 40 minutes. The staging of the manual labour of washing laundry makes the audience aware not just of the time needed but also of the strangeness of the work (fig. 10).

All volunteers across the three productions are challenged by the daily routine of preparing and eating food. Abstinence, reduced consumption, sustainable preparation, and self-sufficiency have to be learnt and practised. Unlike today, only local, seasonal food is available; above all they have no

access to prepared food of any form. The food-related practices demonstrated in the Living History programmes are inspired by historical models. Frontier House, for example, focuses on agriculture and gardening, animal handling and storage. The families received a first food ration at the start of their time travel, because the gardens and fields could not be immediately harvested. Their pantries contain mainly tinned food and flour. They have cows and chickens to provide milk and eggs. The Clune family, made up of two adults, two teenage girls, and two younger children, quickly runs out of food. Adrienne, the mother of the family, explains to the audience: "I'm really concerned about food […]. I'm trying to ration it, because I'm taking care of a family of six and two teenagers who appear to be ravenously hungry all the time. […] They don't understand the concept of rationing. They've never had to do that before."[16] The voiceover explains that Adrienne fears that her two sons are losing too much weight, and indeed the viewer can see that they are becoming thinner. But the narrator puts these concerns into perspective. The audience is told that the Clunes have plenty of supplies; their problem is that they do not have the modern types of food they are used to. The voiceover narration has suggested that initially the time travellers are ignorant, but the viewer sees them learn how to work with the foodstuffs available. Rationing cannot solve their problem, they realise; they recognise that they must emphasise home-grown produce. Lacking fridges, freezers, supermarkets, and greenhouses, they are forced by the time-travel experiment to integrate the cultivation of fruit and vegetables into their daily lives. Self-sufficiency stands in contrast to shopping. A long sequence concludes this storyline, with the planting and care of the gardens presented positively, using cinematic devices such as rhythmic editing and upbeat Western music. Nevertheless, the effort and hard work are always evident.

Over the course of the episodes, all the families find their way in historical everyday life and master their tasks. At first, traditional roles go unquestioned, with the patriarchal family order seeming to function well. However, tension is generated by the participants' comparisons with their "normal" lives in the present. The women are dissatisfied with a role that means they are constantly busy preparing food, ensuring supplies, and doing the laundry and other household tasks. The hard, monotonous work does not engage their intellect, only their physical and organisational

16 Episode two of Frontier House, 00:33:25–00:34:47.

Fig. 11: Gordon Clune is harvesting hay and summarises the time-travel experience from his perspective. Film still, Frontier House (PBS/Channel4, US 2002), episode six, 00:13:48.

Fig. 12: Adrienne Clune does the washing up and summarises the time-travel experience from her perspective. Film still, Frontier House (PBS/Channel4, US 2002), episode six, 00:13:00.

talents. The result is a dichotomy of physical overload and mental understimulation. The men, by contrast, feel strengthened in their position as head of the family. They are consistently fulfilled by the physical labour of sowing and harvesting, cutting firewood, and maintaining and expanding the farm – even when the effort exceeds their "normal" daily routine. Liberated from the excesses of the present and reduced to the necessities of life, they recognise an elemental sense of the meaning of life.[17] Gordon Clune at Frontier House takes a short break from haymaking to state to the camera (fig. 11): "All of my children, including myself, we're all leaving here feeling like better human beings, better equipped to enjoy the things that we take for granted in our 21st-century lives. […] It became a labor of love. A lot of this labor's become enjoyable."[18] Back in the kitchen, his wife, Adrienne, sums up her woman's experience (fig. 12):

17 Weiß 2019, 130.

18 Episode six of Frontier House, 00:14:13–00:14:30.

> Men are so much less complicated than women. Women want, they want more than just shelter and food. They want something to look forward to. They want to be entertained. They want a break from the monotony. In five months, I've only had, probably, about three or four meals that somebody else prepared. All the rest I've done. It's almost like I was transported to a labor camp for five months. I have experienced depression here on the frontier. I have never been depressed before in my life. I've never had to deal with that before.[19]

At the end of Schwarzwaldhaus 1902, the voiceover tells the audience that weeks after the end of the time travel, Ismail still feels alienated in the present and misses the peace and quiet of the farm. His wife, Marianne, sees things differently. She liked living in the country, but not the living conditions of the past, which, she realises, she had previously romanticised.[20]

To summarise: Living History formats are not simply focused on historical everyday life but rather highlight comparisons between past and present. The influence of life in the 21st century creates obstacles and limits for the participants that they have to try to transcend. The entertainment value of the programmes lies in the tension between success and failure. But they also open up discussion of ways of living and thinking. The participants and also the audience can review their own values and norms and, if necessary, renew them. The viewer might wonder: How would I have behaved? Could I live and work like that? Could I do without modern conveniences? Reality-TV time travel thus gives viewers the opportunity to consider their current values. That is not, however, the intention of this programming, which is primarily a form of entertainment television. But a welcome side effect.[21]

The Good Old Days – A Utopia?

Time travel creates an alternate space sufficiently distant from the viewer's present to open up today's value and realities for discussion. Such programming is a manifestation of the fascination with experiencing another age at

19 Episode six of Frontier House, 00:12:57–00:13:35.

20 Weiß 2019, 132.

21 Ulrich/Knape 2015, 245.

first hand.[22] Living History is based on existing media representations of the past, which may seem a simpler, more manageable world, a utopian alternative to the complexity of the present. How can we capture in theory the ongoing connection with the present noted in the earlier discussion?

In his "Zeitschichten-Theorie" (theory of layers of time), Reinhard Koselleck distinguishes between spatial and temporalised utopias. These utopias are often created in media narratives. Spatial utopias locate events of the present in strange and unreal places, termed by Dominik Orth "Nirgendorte" (nowhere places).[23] With the location of the story anchored in the present, it appears possible to travel to these places or worlds, if one can find them. Temporalised utopias are created by stories that take place outside the present. With time determining the narrative level, it is not possible to travel to and experience these places, which inhabit the past or future. The narrative level shifts from space to time. At the same time, the reference to reality shifts from time to space. Thus, in spatial utopias the tie to reality lies in the time, while in temporalised utopias the reference to reality is inscribed in the place, where alternatives to contemporary society are designed.[24] The distance from contemporary society in Schwarzwaldhaus 1902, Frontier House, or The 1900 House is not spatial, but pseudo-temporal. In every form of utopia, however, space and time are related.

In this form space is not only functional and geographically locatable but also ideologically charged. Michel Foucault proposed that our lives do not take place in a homogeneous and empty space, for these living spaces are charged with qualities and populated by phantasms. In his view, the world must be perceived as a network of spaces that are interconnected in a variety of ways. There are always ordinary spaces. But there are also spaces that do not seem to belong to the everyday. Foucault calls them "special spaces". Special spaces are related to the ordinary spaces, on which they have an effect.[25] Among others, the worlds created by the media can be seen as such special spaces.

Foucault divides them into two types, which are interdependent on each other. First, there are utopias, which are unreal. They correspond to spatial

22 Kramp 2011, 479.

23 Koselleck, 2013, 133–134; Orth 2008, 2.

24 Koselleck 2013, 138; also Orth 2008, 4.

25 Foucault 1992, 34–37.

utopias according to Reinhard Koselleck or "Nirgendorte" by Dominik Orth. Foucault's second category of special spaces are heterotopias. They are consequently located in contemporary society on the one hand, and in social counter-images with simplified structures and a clarity that the heterogeneous power relations of society do not allow on the other. This real space, Foucault proposes, is as well-ordered, with its own rules and behaviours, as the current space is disorganised and confused. These spaces are connected to all other social spaces by openings and closings, and access to them requires a gesture of permission. So it is also with Living History formats. Selection for participation is as much an opening of the heterotopia as is the broadcasting of the finished programmes to viewers.

How do Living Histories occupy heterotopic spaces? Living Histories involve topological areas that are outside contemporary everyday life but relate to current living conditions, as we have seen. The creation of these special spaces is part of the first episodes of each programme, which portray and relate in voiceovers, the remodelling of historical houses, their decoration with historical everyday objects, the creation of traditional clothing, and the provision of historical furniture.[26] The past is thus transformed into a heterotopia and anchored in the present. The time travel of the participating families, by contrast, accords with Koselleck's concept of the temporalisation of the plot. This model of time travel contrasts the stressful everyday life of the present, characterised by individualism, complexity, technology, and noise, with a utopia of the "good old days", a heterotopic space that meets the desire for greater simplicity and clearer social rules.[27]

Koselleck's categories of spatial and temporalised utopia therefore do not exist separately when it comes to Living History. Spatial verifiability is possible, which is also part of the heterotopic character. The filming locations can be visited: the Bowler family home (The 1900 House) is in south-east London, at 50 Elliscombe Road. The Kaltwasserhof,[28] run by the Boro family, is in Münstertal in the Black Forest. Neither of these houses has been refurbished. The Frontier House site has been transformed into an open-air museum[29] where visitors can learn about the history of the settlement of

26 Weiß 2019, 69–77.

27 Weiß 2017, 103; also Orth 2008, 22.

28 https://t1p.de/8cnc1 [accessed 9 February 2024].

29 https://virginiacitymt.com/Save-Our-History/Frontier-House [accessed 9 February 2024].

the American West through museum-based Living History. All these former film locations continue to have a heterotopic character as museum spaces, even beyond the Living History productions themselves. The programmes remain media-created temporalised utopias.

When we think of utopian stories, it is likely our minds run to future scenarios in which society has overcome fundamental problems such as war and envy and everyone lives together peacefully on a global (or intergalactic) scale according to clear and fair rules. Living History shows that utopian stories can also be located in the past, from where current conditions can be questioned.

Conclusion

Fiction and reality meet in Living History with its medialised narratives of everyday life.[30] Through a constructed shift in time, it opens up opportunities for questioning and then transforming current conditions that are reflected in a historicised setting – even if primarily intended as entertainment.

In this time travel, banalities become central – doing the laundry, physical work, uncomfortable clothing, too-firm furniture, and unappealing food. As shown, many of these problems are experienced physically, by the bodies of the participants. The early failures are not because of the historical situation as the voiceover suggests, but rather because of the psychological and physical limitations of the participants' lives in the now. They have to leave behind their current daily routines and learn antiquated practices. In nominally re-living the past, they open up opportunity for current behaviour and assumptions about what everyday life must have been like in the past. The participants repeatedly break out of their historical roles to act according to their views and routines in the present. But it is exactly this breaking-out that generates the individual and societal knowledge inherent in time travel.

The staging and filmic presentation frame the audience's perception. Above all, the voiceover narration and emotionalisation provide instructions on how to interpret what the viewers are seeing, generating a bond for the audience not only with the participating family members but also with the time travel itself. In light of the heterotopian utopias of the "good old

30 Wulff 1995, 107.

days" that are embedded in the present, the content of Living History programmes is far enough removed from the current everyday life of the participants and viewers to bring it up for discussion. Nevertheless, it remains close enough to their lives to be understood. The complicity of participants and viewers within the construction, but outside the narrative, allows the viewers to take a position on the historicised events from a contemporary perspective. With the re-creation of historical living conditions, the present and the past constantly collide. The programmes present traditional values and conservative lifestyles but set them up for discussion alongside contemporary ways of life.

However, we should not overlook that in Living History, as always in Reality-TV, events are turned into narratives and entertainment. The filmed footage is documentary in nature, as the protagonists are accompanied only by camera teams during the experiment and they are free to act. However, this documentary material is edited during the post-production to provide a specific message. The editing and structuring interweave several narratives dramaturgically. In each episode, storylines are launched, at least one is ended and another is continued; a cliffhanger is included to keep viewers interested by holding in suspense. In the final episode all the narratives are brought to a satisfying conclusion when the time travellers return to their own time, where they review their experiences for themselves and the audience. Furthermore, the omnipresent and omnipotent narration, also added during post-production, forms the plots. The narrator always knows more than the protagonists and more than the audience, because the script is written when the filming is complete and the material has been structured, which makes it seem as if the information it contains is taken directly from the footage. In fact, the voiceover shapes that evidence. It "helps" the audience interpret and categorise the events shown as time travel. The historical times seen in the programmes must be understood as a symbolic world of meaning, not as an image or reenactment of a real past. Living History programmes primarily deliver ideas about how life must have been, ideas that are based on other media constructions, in literature, film, television, photographs, or paintings, for example. History is presented according to the taste of the audience – in a narrative, as entertainment, and experientially.

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Filmography

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