Groups of adolescents: from images to imaginary; from virtuality to the cinema
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Abstract
We use the language of cinema to reflect on the functions of adolescent groups. We started from the relation that cinema maintains with the representation differently from virtual environments, allowing as dreaming, a transformative function. We use cinematographic images to illustrate some of the functions that groups can have in adolescence. In some cases they may reinforce pathological dynamics of confusion, depersonalisation and splitting; in other cases groups may be a valuable source of support in the process of identity formation.

Keywords: adolescent group, representation, cinema, virtuality

“Groupality” in adolescence in the virtual era
The impact of today’s new technologies and virtual contexts the overloading of perception at the expense of the representation forces psychoanalysts working with adolescents to consider the processes that regulate the functioning of psychic reality and relationships (Tisseron, Missonier and Stora, 2006; Tisseron, 2008; Tisseron, 2014) and to face the changes of the techniques, the practices and the settings of intervention (Gabbard, 2012; Migone, 2003; Longo, 2013).
Considering that virtual world is not opposed to the real world and not flattened on the use of technologies, we believe that the “cyberspace” is a complex area in which the exploration of the relationship between intrapsychic, external reality and new relational forms is still a work in progress.
The “metapsychological guidelines” psychoanalysts can use to investigate changes in psychic functioning in the relationship with new technologies include the connection between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, by proposing an illusion of reality which exempts from psychic work of link and transformation necessary to the internal / external world dialogue (Guignard, 2007).
In a wider meaning, psychic suffering, the “malaise” of the modern world, seems to be characterised by defects of symbolization and the failure of intermediary formations and linking processes, with specific mechanisms that articulate the link between subject, groups and intersubjective spaces (Kaës, 2012).
In particular, in the case of teenagers we can speak of “virtualescence” (Gozlan, 2014) in so far as virtual contexts allow one to experience fluid, multiple identities, supported by work of the Ego-ideal. Narcissistic needs of this developmental phase join virtual environments, in which adolescents escape from the sexual body that becomes, in a virtual space, disembodied, satisfy their desire denying the time of thought, live in the potential area of always being connected.
The new kinds of relationship also assume forms of “groupality”, replacing the real meeting of the group with the other. The real meeting starts, in fact, from the encounter of the bodies setting a boundary between an inside and an outside. Like groups, although they are more similar to masses, “groupalities” propose anyway an
identity system based on the centrality of the mechanism of identification, as defined by Freud in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921).

The crucial questions for the adolescent, such as “Who am I?” “Where does my identity end and other’s identity begin?” are transplanted to the virtual world, which brings both solutions and risks. Let’s think to some contemporary manifestations of clinical conditions: pro-anorexia websites and blogs. These websites promote a philosophy of life, a Creed, to the Goddess Ana, glorifies the identity of the anorexic, ignoring the idea of illness and suffering and challenging the society on the web.

This phenomenon, which we interpret as “group configuration of the symptom” (Margherita, 2013), represents a common solution to the problem of identity, expression also of the adolescent mirroring need, that risks, if undetected, can reinforce pathological, narcissistic tendencies in a fragile identity. For example, the condition of anorexic “mono-polarity” described by Marinelli (2004), such as the belonging to a sect with his own rules and ceremonial, appears in the virtual space with some variations.

We are, therefore, talking about those cases in which the Internet becomes the *medium* through which psychopathology is expressed in a contemporary representation of the disease. Groups and e-communities aggregate collective identities on the symptoms (anorexia, but also self-harm behaviours, attacks on body), in opposition to any clinical or therapeutic settings (Margherita, 2013; Gargiulo and Margherita, 2014).

More generally, the primary function of group identity in adolescence is to satisfy needs for stability and consistency and provide a space for developing identity that facilitates the transition from family dependence to affiliation to another social group. This paper does not discuss the aspects of the virtual groups that support developmental tasks, but we would like to discuss about the risk of the contact with “pseudo-representation”, where is difficult to see the linking with the internal objects and where we could find the use of primitive mechanisms of defence.

Another iconic matrix medium is cinema, which preserves the dreamlike space of the “as if”. Here the image becomes the imaginary (Lombardozzi, 2006) through the possibility of recognize the emotions under a texture of connections with narrative developments that open the way to symbolization.

Precisely because of its analogy with the alpha function and with *réverie*, dream and of waking dream thought (Bion, 1962; Corrao, 1998; Ferro, 2006; Gronstein, 2010; Civitarese and Ferro, 2013), cinema has always been a subject of interest to psychoanalysis (Musatti, 1950; Metz, 1977; Morin, 1982; Stagnitta and Tramonte, 2012; Sabbadini, 2014; Valdré, 2015; Bocca and Riefolo, 2016). Dreamlike and cinematographic images decrease the vigilance and induce a regression; the special status of cinematographic and dreamlike perception introduces a character of reality that is not the reality itself, answering to some creative and transformative potentiality of the psyche.

It seems to us that the cinema can *mediate* the relationship between the internal world and external reality, serving a function analogous to *mediation objects* in the clinic.
context (Vacheret, 2002). The mediation objects organise in the groups the phantasmatic experience of individual and groupal emotional levels.

Carbone et al. (2013) showed that in work with adolescents in non-therapeutic contexts the medium of cinema can facilitate the formation and prevention processes and thus help adolescents and adults with the growth process.

Even in adolescent psychotherapy, the mediation of the cinematographic language, in some cases, seems to be able to offer an intermediary area where it is possible to distinguish between the real and the phantasmatic plan, the internal world from the external reality. Film can become a kind of third language that belongs to neither the adolescent nor the adult analyst. It provides a way of accessing the representational universe constructing a dialogue between the generations. In particular, in adolescent groups settings, we often could find films narrations, which transformed by groupal processuality, become similar to a shared dream, aggregating emotional elements, affections, images associated with other images where a polysemic language is created, located in the space of the preconscious. Here we shall not discuss the use of film as a mediator in clinical practice; instead we reflect on the group of adolescents using some images of cinema. We will discuss scenes and plots from films in which adolescent groups play a central role, considering the function of cinema as an “apparatus to construct images” (Ferruta, 2016) which has a similar and different link with the representation in virtual contexts. We selected films from different genres and historical periods and have used some scenes as metaphors for the typical processes and functions of the peer group in adolescence. In some cases the peer group reinforces pathological dynamics of confusion, depersonalisation and splitting, whilst in others it acts as a valuable source of support during identity formation.

Groups of adolescents in the cinema

Lord of the Flies: on regression

*Lord of the Flies* (dir. Brook, 1963) was based on the novel by William Golding (1952). It is a classic that has been widely interpreted from philosophical, anthropological and psychoanalytic perspectives that explore its symbolic and metaphorical references on the theme of the perennial struggle between good and evil. The survivors of a plane crash, some middle-class English boys, are shipwrecked on an uncontaminated, deserted island. On the background of an extreme, wild natural landscape and in the absence of any adults, the boys begin to organise themselves by electing the wise Ralph as leader. In a first moment the group puts in place a law-abiding society in an effort for survival, making real the oedipical fantasy to put himself in place of the ruler who holds the power. They emulate institutions, roles and hierarchies of the adults’ society, but this organisation rapidly shatters. The satisfaction of needs instead of the use of thought showing the violence of basic emotions, like an agglomeration of beta elements without a container, also evoked by the persistent and annoying buzzing of the flies (Badoni, 2011). Hunting begins to exert a primordial appeal that most of the boys find irresistible and they join a group of hunters, led by Jack. The group of boys gradually slips into a model of a despotic, violent and tribal society. The fracturing of the group makes clear the basic
assumption of the fight and flight (Bion, 1961), in which can be seen the mechanisms of splitting and the persecutory fantasies of a paranoid schizoid individual. Fear grows amongst the shipwrecked boys as a rumour spreads that the island is inhabited by some sort of beast. There is a scene in which Simon, in a trance state, stumbles on a sort of rotting totem surrounded by flies (hence the title) and dashes to the beach to communicate to the others that the monster is actually the body of a crew member (the only adult on the island), but he finds himself swallowed up by a tribal dance during which he is killed by his companions, who mistake him for the beast. This scene allows an immediate contact with hordalic aspects of regressed group. Simon’s murder is the start of a crescendo of violence that leads to other homicides and to extreme persecution of Ralph, who will, however, survive, thanks to the arrival of adults. The final scene is emblematic: the director slowly shows us the naval official, guardian of the boundaries, starting from this white shoes, which evoke the contrast between the world of order of adults and the world of the children, who once isolated and freed from all inhibitions regressed to a primitive, tribal and bloody barbarism. Zaltzman (2007), in his reading of the novel, traces the journey from individuality to mob, the reverse of the Freudian speculation about the birth of psychology of Ego from Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (1921). This journey involves a regression to a new social organisation, a horde without father and the raising of a totem without taboos, and the emergence of death and murder as the primary divinities and the enacting of pure hatred, without any ambivalence. The struggle between good and evil, represented by Jack and Ralph respectively, leads to the dominance of the archaic and primitive instincts instead of thought. This film shows how an extreme situation (such as enforced isolation) strengthens the regressive dimensions of human nature that emerge when one enters a group (Bion, 1961); these dimensions are amplified when the differences of generation and gender collapse. In the monosexual group of boys shown in the film primitive mental processes are strengthened; feelings are erased, relationships break down and action replaces the thought in the maniacal triumph over fear and death.

Picnic at Hanging Rock: on temporal suspension

“Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future and time future contained in time past. If all time is eternally present, all time is unredeemable” (T. S. Eliot).

This film (dir. Weir, 1975) tells the story of a trip taken by a group of girls from an aristocratic private girls’ school to the foot of Hanging Rock, a small mountain near Melbourne on Valentine’s day and the subsequent mysterious disappearance of some of the girls.

The film contains a lot of erotic symbolism, such as the waking up on Valentine’s day and reading notes sent by suitors, that underlines the revival of sexual interest that takes place during adolescence. During the picnic the sensual Miranda, Marion, Irma and Edith turn away from the group and slip away among the rocks. At this point, the images seem to slow down and to repeat; this effect is achieved through the
silence of the interactions and by placing in the foreground the movements and the sounds of the powerful natural setting. Edith, the youngest and most reticent girl, will come back in an evident state of shock, deprived of memory about what happened. The whole town participates in the search for the missing girls. Only Irma is found, unconscious, mysteriously wounded but with her feet mysteriously clean. She doesn’t remember anything about what happened. The mystery of Hanging Rock expands and has tragic consequences for many of those involved. Everybody break down, the young Sara jumps out of a tower and the director dies falling down the stairs. The narrative reconstruction of their disappearance freezes the girls at the time of their last appearance, they will not be found dead, but they will live in an endless present, in the eternal repetition that in adolescence is expressed in a fixation on the previous object experiences that is intended to defend identity and maintain narcissistic homeostasis (Feder, 2001). The journey into the wood and the climb up the rock seem to satisfy an erotic, epistemophilic impulse that makes palpable the intertwining of the life instinct and the death instinct. Set against the background of the difficult coexistence between humankind and nature, the film seems to us an interesting metaphorical account of adolescence as a transitional phase. The time issue, with its own contrast between the time created by the men and the natural time, comes into contact with the typical adolescent tension. It is an example of this the block of the clocks before the girls departure. The dimension of the “time with no time” in the group is amplified, leaving relationships undifferentiated, twins indistinguishable and the girls whose flying hair and white dresses make them into extraordinary icons of femininity are overcome by a sort of common hallucinatory trance, a slow yet urgent ascent into the unknown. The mountain climbing scene is repeated many times in the film, and this peculiar narrative device alters the viewer’s perception of time. For the adolescent the past, the present and the future will settle through the inscription into his own historical time, possible with registration inside the transgenerational link. The mystery of the disappearance is not resolved during and the unfolding of the plot leaves many questions unanswered, which induces an adolescent-like state of suspension in the viewer. This kind of emotions is the kind of state which accompanies therapeutic work with adolescents with the urgency to preserve a mysterious space where it could be possible to tolerate “an indefinite space”. The therapist's capability to feel this kind of feelings (void, suspension, confusion)accompanies the group in a meeting place where it is possible to catch even a thought in arising state. The film is also an example of how, in adolescence, visible intersubjective links are created between members of a group in an intertwining of the life and death instincts, in a mythical time belonging to the origin and to the end.

17 Girls: on acting out
This film (dir. Coulin and Coulin, 2011) is an all-female movie, inspired by events that happened in an American town. Camille, a seventeen-year-old, is a strong and determined girl who becomes pregnant. She aspires to a better life than the one that the adults around her are living and so she decides to keep the baby. She then begins
to fantasize about living with her friends, all of them pregnant and free from their parents’ oppressive attitudes. Running after a different image of the Self, the young girls work to realise this fantasy and they all try to arrange a sexual encounter with a sperm donor/boy. The number of pregnancies in their high school grows and chaos breaks out among the teachers and parents. Their inability to offer a holding is a confirmation of their failure to fulfil the functions of adulthood. The girls’ pregnancy project is part of a more general project of this adolescent group: to assert itself as an autonomous entity, to replace the authority of the family and to fixate on a homosexual relationship whose products will be children born by parthenogenesis, thus realising the ancient, unconscious fantasy of the unique parent (Palladino, 2013). The group is in the foreground in sensory, somatic and even “animal” aspects as evoked by the voiceover in the opening scene: “That summer there was an invasion of ladybugs on the beach” to emphasise the unusual event. The film shows us a flock of seagulls in flight and then the bodies of the girls appear at the harbour’s edge: they are jogging, sweating and breathing together as a single entity, evoking somatic contagion phenomena such as the synchronisation of menstrual cycles in a women’s college. In this film the monosexual group, which offers representations that support the acquisition of gender identity, emerges as an alternative to the maternal model. Whilst the dream of getting pregnant can be read as a regression, the girls also express a desire to achieve emancipation through this marker of adult identity. In a desperate attempt to be identified in a magical and omnipotent way on the basis of an adhesive identification to the group, they dream of creating a community of teen moms who can take care of each other: a kind of group autarchy. The denials and splitting allow to safeguard the identity of the individuals built on a shared condition and to maintain the coherence of the “group psychic apparatus” (Kaës, 1976). Their fixation on this illusion leads the group to a hidden projective identification with the mother’s body and with maternal omnipotence and a sense of fraternal unity emerges to mitigate the risk of disintegration of identity (Chapelier et al, 2000). Every pregnancy belongs to the group since the announcement, confusing the private and the social meaning. When she has an ultrasound scan Camille makes contact with herself and her child, it a moment of intimacy, listening, desire and fear. Where is the space of the desire? Is there any chance of building an “inner maternity” (Bidlowsky, 2000)? It is through Camille’s relationship with her mother that this issue is explored. It becomes evident in the scene in which Camille declares to her mother that she is willing to keep the baby and never to leave him alone; in doing this she is clearly making an accusation against her mother, yet she is also proposing a fusional model where there is no space for an individuative choice. From a gender framework, the mother–daughter relationship, more than the mother–son relationship, is characterised by a complex dynamic of separation, occurring ‘in the name of the same’. When the woman develops, she has her mother as the ‘general director’ of identification from whom she separates at the same time (Nunziante Cesàro, 2014). In a scene that illustrates the ambivalence surrounding pregnancy, the girls play soccer on the beach in the advanced stages of pregnancy, touching their bellies and kicking a flaming ball. Abortion slips into the plot of the film: Camille will fail to
carry her baby to term, unlike the other girls. Many authors have emphasized that the maternal urge acts on the female unconscious, producing an acting out, typically in adolescence. It seems to us that in the film the psychic rehash transforms itself in acting through the reproduction on the body of a self-generation phantasy, which reinforces the group illusion preventing the recognition of gender and generation differences. The feminine element of the group gets stronger, males are not asked to act as fathers, instead they are treated as distant brothers or comrades and relegated to a secondary role. Different acting will take different roads and the girls will differentiate among them. “We had 15 children (...) of course we have not brought up together, At 17 you’re not serious (...) you dream, you’re bursting with wild energy and nobody can stop you.”The film shows the potential of fusional undifferentiation that each group evokes and that is amplified in a female group, clearly updating the world of relationships with the primary object. Here we can see the common symbiotic zone and the identification between I and Us that often shades the borders between the Self and the objects. This is evident in the choral aspect of the final, where it’s revealed that the narrating voice is not that one of Camille, as the only one protagonist.

Stand by Me: on the grieving process
The film Stand by Me (dir. Reiner, 1986) is based on Stephen King’s novella The Body (1982), published as part of his collection Different Seasons, and is an example of how the group can become a source of support during the processes of identifying and subjection that an adolescent face in the metabolization of the depressive elements, thanks to the immediacy of identification and mirroring mechanisms. The film starts with the words “I was not thirteen years old the first time that I saw a dead human being.” In a long flashback Gordie, now adult and a professional writer, recounts the importance of a particular moment in his life, colour by his awareness of the unrepeatability of the relationships built in that epoch: “I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?” The plot revolves around a training trip that the protagonists took in the summer between elementary school and secondary school, at the end of which the four pre-adolescent boys Gordie, Chris, the explosive Vern and Teddy will find themselves changed and grown up. The events of that summer will have laid the foundations of their subsequent lives and once they return to their small Oregon town it seems to them to be “changed, smaller”. The boys leave in search of the dead body of one of their peers who disappeared mysteriously. They want to be heroes, but the trip is also metaphor for the grieving process of the main protagonist, who lost his twenty-year-old brother Danny, who was revered by his father, in a car accident. It is also an elaboration process of all the losses including the separation from the primary objects and the representation of the childish Self (the childish body). Having reached their objective and discovered the dead body of the boy, who has been crushed by the train, and after having strenuously defended the discovery’s glory to a group of older and violent boys, the protagonists choose an unexpected road: They wouldn’t become heroes in that way. It is the body research, a tension that dissolves, a trip finished
with the unconscious and internalized appropriation of a new, alive and pulsating body, it is the last farewell to the childhood. There is not necessary to narrate it to the word, the presence of the friends as witness will be enough. Typical of the masculine adolescent’s groups as action, exploration, adventure desire and also to the risk are described by the movement of crossing of the train tracks. The bonds between them as a group create a space for sharing histories, stories and fantasies, and also to experiment pulsionality, languages and all those important things you can talk about when “the girls are not around yet”. And so past phantoms and present pains could find a space especially where there is a lack of parental function. Chris addresses a precious narcissistic support to Gordie, that perceive itself as the second one after the death of his brother and, in particular, in the relationship with his father. Chris, can appreciate Gordie’s particular qualities, he sees Gordie’s gift for writing and encourages him to cultivate his talent: “I wish I were your father, you would not go around talking about doing those stupid technical schools ... God gave you this, it is your stuff, you do not waste it, but kids usually waste it all if there is someone who keeps an eye on them, and if your parents are too messed up to do it ... maybe I should do it by myself.” And it is a narcissistic recharge the encouragement of Gordie to Chris, sensitive little thief but after all honest and deceived by the adults, to bring out the best of himself, making him glimpse the possibility of a better future. The film shows that in adolescence, the group supports the Ideal ego with the secondary narcissism of the subjects, linking the split elements of Self. The protagonists project parts of themselves into the others, that through the “adolescent’s community” can be reintegrated (Meltzer, 1991).

The Wave and The Class: adult function
Both films were made in 2008 and both are fictionalized accounts of real events. In both the subject is a training group (the class) and the consequences functional or dysfunctional of the role played by an adult (the teacher). The Wave (dir.Gansel, 2008) is based on the novel of the same name by Strasser (1981), which was inspired by a social experiment which took place in 1967 at Cubberley High School, Palo Alto, USA. It is the story of Reiner, a teacher seen by students as “alternative” in comparison with the other teaching staff. He will end up conducting an experiment on autarchy. The experience will be deeply involving. The class decides to carry out an experiment to answer the question of whether a totalitarian system can be established in a modern, Western environment. First the class and then the whole school become the testing ground for a group-movement with strict rules based on the denial of differences: The Wave. The same psycho-sociological mechanisms that fuelled the Third Reich are played out: the choice of symbols of group identity, a uniform, a symbol and a salute – and an enemy definition. Reiner, initially for didactic purposes, will lead the training group inside a manipulated group illusion. The movement of the group will trigger an uncontrolled chain reaction that affects the whole school, leading to abuse and the banishing of dissenters the female students and Rainer’s wife who try in vain to introduce an element of reality. Soon Reiner becomes the first victim of the experiment. He is fascinated by the power he has as
leader, which is reflected in the respect that the students start to show for him and this results in his function as an educator being overwhelmed. The consequences of the movement are illustrated by what happens to Tim, whose already fragile identity bring out the emergence of psychopathological aspects.

*The Class* (dir. Cantent, 2008) is another film centered on group dynamics in a scholastic context. It is based on an autobiographical novel by François Bégaudeau, a teacher who appears in the film as himself. The original title (*Entre le murs [Within the walls]*) captures the atmosphere of the film, which was shot entirely within the walls of a school, in a confined space. The school walls serve as a boundary between the internal and external worlds, between the similar and the different (the foreigner) for example between the adult and the adolescent. In the foreground there is François, a French literature teacher, who becomes the guarantor of integration and dialogue amongst a mixed class of students in the final year of middle school. The students come from various ethnic minorities and the film captures problematic situations related to immigration and social integration. We see an adult dealing with adolescent hatred that is linked to instinctual excess but also has an identity function. Moreover, the adult must be hated by the adolescent to restore with him an object genitalized relationship (Chapelier et al, 2000). Through the teacher becomes clear the delicate task: accepting the exclusion from the group in order to constitute the unity, giving meaning to the transgression as strengthening the narcissistic omnipotence in response to regressive movements. Above all we are talking about the capability to resist at the reprisals and to demonstrate the survival of object (Winnicott, 1965). This hand-to-hand between different worlds, sometimes painfully failed, dissolves in the final in the scene of the football game between teachers and students where an area of game is restored and the clash can be turned into a play against and with the other. With respect to the adult function, *The Wave* seems to give us a glimpse of the risk of an “inscribed in negative” formation (Kaës, 1998) that underlies a narcissistic investment of the unfulfilled desires of the leader-teacher as not metabolized elements, where it misses a place for the difference of the other and the student runs the risk to become a molded object in the omnipotence of his trainer. In *The Class*, instead, the clash and confrontation with the real other in its difference puts in forward the relational aspects, thanks to the defined position of the adult who can use the thought as instrument.

**Conclusion**

In our itinerary we used suggestions drawn from the literature, but also from the chronicle, transformed into cinematographic narrations to reflect on some peculiarities and functions of the group in adolescence. We should point out that, just as the logic of dreams refers to an n-dimensional space, there are a number of ways these cinematographic works could be read; we have given our own interpretations. Our examples suggest that the group allows, in heterogeneous way, the comparison between new relationships and old family experiences, allowing the exit from the family and the transformation of one’s own internal gruppalities. For an adolescent
the external group can revive the groupal topical (Chapelier et al., 2000), starting new identification processes that allow the individual to leave behind the Oedipus complex, abandon incestuous identifications and the taking place in the transgenerational lineage. Starting with Lord of the Flies we accompanied the group in his dangerous regression, we faced the aspects related to the sexuality and to the body. We see a comparison between pressures practiced by the internal world and the expectations of the external world in the films with female monosexual groups, where the group on the basis of primitive and fusional identifications amplifies a possible block. In their different ways the other examples allowed us to consider situations in which the group supports the process of subjectification (Cahn, 1988).

We conclude the itinerary with the analysis of two films where the function of the adult in the groups of adolescents is underlined to reflect on the therapist's position in the oscillation between the contact with the emotional states (their adolescent elements) and the correct distance which allows the group process unfold, through the delimiting and containing function of the setting (Maltese and Moniello, 2002; Baldassare and Bernabei, 2002). In summary it appears to be crucial in clinical settings with adolescents keeping a frame by restoring a metaphorical area that allows the conditions for a psychic work of symbolization. This is clear for example in psychoanalytic psychodrama, which shows the effectiveness in the treatment of adolescents (Anzieu, 1956; Lebovici et al., 1958; Jeammet and Kestemerg, 1987; Ladame Catipovic and Perret, 1998; Margherita, 2009). Starting from an acting aimed to represent, the protected space of the group allows the revival of the preconscious inscribed in the work of intersubjectivity (Käes, 1999; Margherita et al., 2014). We think that when we work with groups of adolescents in certain clinical contexts (for example in institutional counselling interventions) the use of the language of cinema can be compared with the working experience with the “mediator objects” (Vacheret, 2002). For adolescents of nowadays, digital natives, constantly urged by images, the language of cinema can promote a transition from the image to the imaginary, where emotions, inscribed in a plot of relations, will be transformed in representations through links and adequate settings.

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**Filmography**


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