# *THE FRAN LEBOWITZ SERIES* IN SCORSESE'S *PRETEND IT'S A CITY* AND *PUBLIC SPEAKING*

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**ABSTRACT**
Writer, humorist, and style icon Fran Lebowitz, author of *Social Studies* (1981) and *Metropolitan Life* (1978), then merged in *The Fran Lebowitz Reader* (1994 and 2021), has been the subject of Martin Scorsese's *Pretend It's a City* (2021) and *Public Speaking* (2010). Both introduce Lebowitz as a storyteller, social commentator, and public intellectual who narrates her life in the style of documentary performers (Waugh) without neglecting the techniques of the *cinéma vérité*.
Scorsese's two works on Fran Lebowitz do not conform to the usual biopic yet can be understood as a selective biography. In introducing Fran Lebowitz to a contemporary large audience, the combination of biographical perspective and quasi-*vérité* style addresses the opposition between private and public (Arendt and Habermas). Altogether, the two productions can be considered as a series with an opening (*Public Speaking*) and seven episodes (*Pretend It's a City*) that create Martin Scorsese's series on Fran Lebowitz. The biographical traits, paired with Lebowitz's status as public speaker, create a double portrait, almost a *doppelgänger*, as a split between the Lebowitz's performance and her representation.


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## INTRODUCTION

Writer, humorist, and style icon Fran Lebowitz, author of *Social Studies* (1981) and *Metropolitan Life* (1978) – then merged in *The Fran Lebowitz Reader* (1994 and 2021) – has been the subject of two productions by Martin Scorsese, *Pretend It's a City* (2021, cited as *PIC*) and *Public Speaking* (2010, cited as *PS*). Over the years, Lebowitz has established herself as a public speaker, becoming a media figure known internationally. In his two works on Lebowitz's distinguished career as public intellectual and social commentator, Scorsese does not conform to the usual biopic, yet these two productions can be understood as selective fictional biographies.

The two Scorsese productions constitute one single work that could be titled *The Fran Lebowitz Series*. In *PS* and *PIC*, Scorsese also maintains a level of personal authenticity by inserting his presence as interviewer and interlocutor, as he did in other works such as *Italianamerican* (1974). The two Lebowitz-centered productions can be considered as a series in eight parts: a pilot (*PS*) and seven episodes (*PIC*).

*PS* and *PIC* fulfill the intent of the "serial flow," as defined by Dennis Broe (23). *PS* is about 82 minutes and the seven episodes of *PIC* range from 26:22 to 31:56 minutes each. "The series are designed to be consumed over a short period", as Dennis Broe says, and "the serial series attempts to create a parallel world of real or pure time that itself synchronizes with the viewer's time" (Broe 2019: 23). Both conditions are observed in the composite Lebowitz series, which has enjoyed success beyond expectations. According to Broe, "Television seriality and binge watching have developed as part of this new model of perpetual productivity, or integrated work and leisure" (2019: 2) through a process of "virtual accumulation" and "highly repetitive patterns" (2019: 3).

According to Bandirali and Terrone, "the vast amount of time that is available to television [series] can give rise to 'megamovies,'" where "TV series are rather supersize audiovisual narratives" (2021: 5). We witness what Stiegler defines as an "industrial manufacturing of an audience" that adds "to the addictive quality written into the narrative processes that has caused even twelve-step groups to refer to the consumption of television's new seriality as akin to 'morphine drip'" (2008: xii, quoted by Broe 2019: 44). For this reason, most people have watched *PIC* in one sitting just like they did with even more popular series, to maximize on time, enjoy the pleasure of binge watching, and taking advantage of the fact that the episodes were available at once on Netflix.

## 1. SCORSESE'S PRODUCTIONS ON LEBOWITZ BETWEEN DOCUMENTARIES AND FICTION

Scorsese has produced several nonfiction films and documentaries.[1] To him, as he explains in an interview with Raffaele Donato, "there was never any difference between fiction and nonfiction." He has sought authenticity and 'documentary power' in the faces, words, and actions of the characters in his narrative features" (Ribera 2017: ix); in Scorsese's words: "the first impulse of cinema was to record life" (Ribera 2017: 205). In this context, the early Scorsese shorts were, together with *American Boy* (1978), *Italianamerican* (1974), *It's Not Just You, Murray* (1974), *The Big Shave* (1967), and *What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?* (1963). In these productions, the line between fiction and factual narrative is always crossed. Lebowitz's double performance blurs even more the distinction between biographical facts and their narrative value. Thus, Lebowitz, who has appeared in cameo roles but has never been a thespian, becomes an actress by performing both her own self and her role as public intellectual.

Scorsese complicates the issue of performing by introducing in the context of cinematic acting a figure who is known for public speaking (Lebowitz).[2] The Scorsese productions on Lebowitz feature her as a storyteller, social commentator, and public intellectual who performs her life in the style of a documentary while nodding to the techniques of the *cinéma vérité*. In this case, there is no distinction between the style of documentaries and that of dramatic fiction because,

> Documentary performers 'act' in much the same way as their dramatic counterparts except that they are cast for their social representativity as well as for their cinematic qualities, and their roles are composites of their own social roles and the dramatic requirements of the film (Waugh 2011: 75).

1 For a complete list of documentaries produced by Scorsese, see Grist 2000: 306-308.

2 Lebowitz has been on several talk shows, with Jimmy Fallon, Jay Leno, David Letterman, Bill Maher, Seth Meyers, Conan O'Brian, among others. She has also participated in several documentaries on personalities of the art world and in films: for example, on David Wojnarowicz (2020), *The Booksellers* (2019), *Toni Morrison: The Pieces that I Am* (2019), *The Gospel According to André* (2017), *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures* (2016), the PBS series *New York: A Documentary Film* (2000), *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013, playing Judge Samantha Stogel), *Superstar: The Life and Times of Andy Warhol* (1990), *Law and Order* from 2001 to 2007 (playing Judge Janice Goldberg), and had many other media appearances.


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The concept of "performance" is in fact at the core of Scorsese's considerations, according to editor David Tedeschi in an interview included in the extra features of Scorsese's *Rolling Thunder Revue: A Bob Dylan Story* (2020: 02:26 – 02:42):

> It's something Scorsese talks quite a lot about: how do you capture performance? What is it exactly? And of course he [Scorsese] started on stage in Woodstock and I think it was sort of a graduate level experience in these performances, filming them, and then editing them, understanding the whole process.

Scorsese and Lebowitz share a connection with New York. Is this enough to create a "cinematic bond" between the two? It's not an easy question. According to Raymond, no connection (other than New York, that is) seems obvious between "the Italian-American male filmmaker and the Jewish-American female writer" (2013: 165). Yet some sort of chemistry occurs. Again according to Raymond,

> the attraction [meaning the connection generating the two Scorsese productions, *author's note*] becomes clear, especially since Lebowitz has become known less as a writer and more as an intellectual commenting on the cultural scene. [...] Scorsese himself is mostly seen in the corner of the frame, laughing and responding to Lebowitz's remarks (Raymond 2013: 165-166).

In his interviews with Richard Schickel, Scorsese explained his work with Lebowitz just by saying, "I couldn't resist it." With the interviews to Lebowitz, and filming the public appearances, Scorsese understood how "you could make a different film every night," because, as Schickel argues, "so mercurial is the persona she has created and plays with a sort of noisy subtlety" (2011: 383). Schickel adds,

> However complex his filmmaking, both factual and fictional, becomes, he [Scorsese] remains wedded to the idea that the world offers no more intriguing spectacle than that of a man and/or a woman simply talking to each other or to a camera. To evoke a cliché, such figures are capable of containing multitudes. They are also able of containing Marty – by which I mean that his work on non-fiction film is not just something that keeps a workaholic busy. It is, I think, central to who he is an artist (2011: 383).

The success of the Lebowitz series in Europe has been a surprise to many. However, one must bear in mind that Scorsese's audience is manufactured around a specific New York mystique that occupies the fantasies of the Europeans who consume American popular culture, music, and literature. The charisma of the West Village, especially, still lingers in the mind of the generation who would dream of casually meeting with Joan Baez and Joni Mitchell, maybe even Bob Dylan, at the corner of Bleecker and MacDougal. For this reason, the fandom base that pursues Scorsese's projects on Lebowitz live in the "I love New York" state of mind.

## 2. **FRAN LEBOWITZ'S PUBLIC PERSONA AND FICTIONAL BIOGRAPHY**

The main topic in these Scorsese productions is however their narrative on Lebowitz: she performs her own persona, while Scorsese performs as viewer, fan, and facilitator of the narrative. Do they represent any kind of reality? Do they create a fictional world instead? As Bandirali and Terrone argue, "Fictional worlds differ from the actual world since they have a primary function, which consists in grounding and supporting the development of interesting stories" (2021: 8). *PS* and *PIC* make the point that New York would not be as interesting without Lebowitz's specific point of view or reiteration of the city's aesthetics and mores. Yet, in introducing Fran Lebowitz to a contemporary large audience, the combination of biographical perspective and *vérité* style complicates the opposition between private and public (I am introducing these terms, loosely, according to their use in Arendt and Habermas). What we have is therefore a fictional biography that is meant to accompany Lebowitz's public persona in the public sphere. We thereby see several characters portrayed, all developments of the same Fran Lebowitz, and beginning with the nineteen-year-old rebellious girl who left New Jersey for New York, where she had various jobs and then, in the 70s, wrote for Warhol's *Interview* and *Mademoiselle*.[3]

Lebowitz approaches public life paradoxically**,** by keeping private and public strictly separate. Her celebrity status is mediated in the public sphere by presenting specific charac-

3 See Marc Balet's interviews with Fran Lebowitz in *Interview* (and *Vogue*): Balet 1994, Balet 1991, Balet 1981, Balet 1980, Balet 1979; Alessandro 2021 online and Alessandro 2022; Clemente (2016); Kaiser (1989). Fran Lebowitz's articles in the column *I Cover the Waterfront* are now collected in the volume *Fran Lebowitz: I Cover the Waterfront* (*Andy Warhol's Interview: Volume 1: Best of the First Decade 1969-1979*, 2004). See also in *Interview:* Lebowitz 2019 and Lebowitz 1982.


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ters/masks, such as speaker, political commentator, TV and film personality, humorist and writer. Lebowitz merges these masks in an unusual form of self-branding. She drops selected biographical details to her fandom base, such as moving to New York in her twenties with 200 $, her diverse and random initial jobs before writing for *Warhol's Interview* and *Mademoiselle.* She keeps her public image under control as well as the opposition between public and private by avoiding all situations tied to gossip and the disclosure of personal emotions, and she carefully manages the information that she wants to be conveyed. She "presents" herself through "presentational media" instead of "being represented" through "representational media". She protects her "reputational persona" (Marshall 2015: 28).

Lebowitz does not hide from the public sphere: she hides her private life and self from the media while at the same time being visible all the time. Her idea of private life corresponds to Arendt's equation with secrecy. In "The Public and The Private Realm," Arendt explains that modern individualism determines the opposition between privacy and participation in society (191). According to Arendt, "'public' signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it" (201). This idea is developed by Marshall as "secret life" (Marshall 2010: 500, echoing Arendt) to the fandom base. The negations on which Lebowitz's life are based include not revealing any significant fact about her private life, on top of not having a computer, not having a cellular phone, not managing her social media presence, not writing, not having a talk show, not participating in general to what people label as "social" and "public" lives. Lebowitz manages to handle this dichotomy between public and private with effortless ability to the extent that what we see in public seems to be her "natural" self.

Together with Lebowitz's status as public speaker, the biographical traits create a double portrait, almost a doppelgänger, and a split between the representation of Lebowitz and her performance. To the viewers and fans, Lebowitz's public persona as framed by Scorsese replaces fictionally the real person, enabling therefore an illusion of balance between media reality and biographical reality, paired however with biographical accuracy. Yet the doppelgänger created by the performance does not exist by itself. As Vardoulakis points out, "The doppelgänger, it will be argued, is an operative or effective presence to the extent that it effects the undoing of the framing of the subject by the opposition between mere presence and absence" (Vardoulakis 2010: 1).

Scott quotes a significant 2010 interview: "When an interviewer asked her why in *Public Speaking,* she did not discuss her personal life, Lebowitz replied, 'I'm not interested in other people so I don't expect other people to be interested in me, and if they are, too bad'" (Scott 2011: 124). Overall, one has a lingering doubt about how much biographical details one must give in the public sphere for the fandom base's curiosity to be satisfied. In both Scorsese productions, it looks like Lebowitz discusses her biography at length. Yet, despite the fictional element created by the narrative act itself, the question about how much biography must be revealed until the realm of private life is affected remains unsolved; that however echoes Arendt's concept of a private life that, not being made public, borders into secretive (2000: 182–230).

The focus of *Public Speaking* is on Lebowitz's eloquence in framing her biographical events, with various degrees of impact, into narrative. Her concept of public speaking is based on having a one-way conversation that includes an audience asking questions at the end of the talk, but in a way that always gives her the last word, meaning that she is in constant control. When Lebowitz fictionalizes her biography, she chooses facts with the purpose of turning them into emblematic events. In fact, her fictionalization of the conflict between private and public sphere is crucial to maintain a distance from an inquisitive fandom base. Her defense of privacy must not be read, however, as disdain for her audience: "The idea that Lebowitz's public image should be read as a performance, as a conscious process of withholding and disclosure, pertains to her desired social recalibration of the public/private dialectic that is the foundation of her ethical position" (Scott 2011: 121).

Lebowitz had various jobs before turning to writing and speaking professionally, becoming a social commentator, a fashion celebrity and socialite, and performing as an actress in numerous cameo appearances she was a cab driver, she did apartment cleaning, was a bartender and a belt peddler; she did advertising sales for *Changes* magazine, and many other specific micro-details show up in her oral biographical narrative. To which, we must add how Lebowitz learned how to play and then stopped playing the cello, how she learned to tell the time, or when she received a class wit award in high school. She was also expelled from Morristown High School after attending for two years, as well as from the Wilson School in Mountain Lakers in New Jersey (apparently, her acerbic sense of humor was more than the school could bear). She lived in Poughkeepsie briefly, and she worked for Project Head Start (Kaiser 1989: 137). All these details can


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be either part of her real life or, in part, of her fictional life. The difference between facts and fiction, however, can only be evaluated according to the context and the audience she is facing. As Brylla and Kramer write, "Western audiences live in a mass-mediated culture that filters reality through the prism of factual media; hence, their emotional and cognitive comprehension of the world is, to a significant extent, informed and consolidated by documentary film" (2018: 1). In this context, "filmmaking practices and sociocultural traditions negotiate the indexical link between representations and their real-life counterparts" (Brylla and Kramer 2018: 1.

The question therefore is how the Lebowitz-Scorsese productions inform our emotional and cognitive comprehension, and how Lebowitz's style, which is both natural and controlled, can be communicated through the medium of the documentary. A persistent issue in making documentaries concerns the level of authenticity and what we consider to be reality, as if a filmic production had to chronicle a daily diary. While nonfiction productions often aim at showing people in real life situations and events, Marquis indicates how Renov (1993) points out that "such efforts are finally 'fragile if not altogether insincere," because "documentaries are always 'the result of interventions that necessarily *come between* the cinematic sign (what we see on the screen) and its referent (what existed in the world)" (2013: 17).

Filmmaker Kirby Dick explains that a documentary film contributes to the creation of a doppelgänger that enters public consciousness in a way that "haunts any interaction between the subject and anyone who has seen the film" (2015: 47); this is precisely what happens to Lebowitz's representation through Scorsese's filmic lenses. Lebowitz's body language (mediated by her fashion style and in fact conveyed almost exclusively through it), her sharp humor and Scorsese's laughter, which follows Lebowitz's every utterance (as if Scorsese were playing an exaggerated version of the laugh track in a sitcom) are the strategies that confirm and at the same time unsettle the *vérité* that we are supposed to validate when watching *PS* and *PIC* as documentaries. Indeed, there are moments when you think you are watching the routine of a strange comedic couple, with Scorsese being the faithful sidekick.

We must consider that "seriality produces persona" (Marshall 2014 online). The structure is that of a "patterning of *personnage*" which, in turn, creates a "structures of familiarity for the audience, but also a structure of performance for the actor" (Marshall 2014 online) based on the repetition of "physical traits/appearance; speech patterns, psychological traits/habitual behaviours; interaction with other characters; environment; biography" (Pearson 2007, as mentioned by Lotz 2013: 23). This pattern is at the center of Scorsese's productions: Lebowitz is presented in similar outfits, performs constant routines such as walking around and being interviewed by Scorsese, and relating stories from her biography while she interacts both with Scorsese and other people on set. The result, Marshall again, is that "the seriality of character/*personage* [...] informs the idea of the actor" (2014 online). At the same time, seriality "informs the concept of persona in the contemporary moment," and this is done "as a form of productive performance of public self" on the part of the "actor-self" (Marshall 2014 online) – meaning the actor performing his/her own self, as Lebowitz performs her own self.

Does Lebowitz act? Not in any traditional sense, but she definitely performs. While filmmakers usually give precise indications to actors on how to act, Lebowitz follows her own method based on her awareness and experience as a speaker. Usually, Lebowitz's public performance are a mix of a half hour talk, an interview with a journalist and a one hour Q&A with the audience, depending on the location (US or abroad, so that there is dubbing). Her subjects are politics and American social mores, with a specific ironic take tied to a down to earth way of making commentaries and delivering punchlines. In the interviews in both productions (filmed in specific locations around New York that include the outdoors filming of her walking, but never at her home), Scorsese appears only as the interviewer and provides short camera movements directed at himself as he shares the scenes with Lebowitz and asks her questions. As classic Dutch documentarist Joris Ivens (1898-1989) advises to a filmmaker ("Use yourself or anybody as stand-ins – to keep the non-actor from exhaustion or self-consciousness," Ivens 1940 in Waugh 2011: 73), this is precisely what Scorsese does with Lebowitz, appearing as himself solely to break down Lebowitz's almost uninterrupted scenic presence.

This is in fact the point: her scenic presence. She is not a professional actor, yet she is not a non-professional actor either; she is a skilled performer, who makes a living out of her public performances, and Scorsese films her as such. He also anticipates her actions; as Ivens (1940) explains in Waugh, "The surest way to avoid loss of time with re-takes is to know and anticipate the real movements of the man [subject], to catch the regular rhythm of his [their] normal action[s] (which is far from re-enactment)" (Waugh 2011: 73). Scorsese's works on Lebowitz highlight their synergy in creating the Lebowitz character/subject, which in times


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generates more and more filming from one documentary to a seven-part docuseries.

Lebowitz seems to be implicitly dismissive of this approach. In the first chapter of extras at the end of *PS*, she says: "I don't believe in collaborations as you well know. To me, this is Marty's movie. [...] I didn't make this movie. You know, I have seen this movie seven times, I have seven different movies" (*PS* 00:29-00:46). Yet it is possible to look at the collaboration between Lebowitz and Scorsese as a study in the techniques that each use.

Essentially, those techniques reflect the dynamics in the Lebowitz-Scorsese "comedic duo" in action both in 2010 and 2021. Furthermore, Ivens' idea of "acting naturally" becomes quite emblematic in the interaction between them: their friendship and habit for each other's presence makes them perform by looking at each other and not at the camera, acting their own parts/roles, thus bringing a *vérité* quality to their screen presence. The idea of "a naturalistic, representational performance style borrowed from fiction" (Waugh 2011: 79) constitutes the performance. This idea of "natural" can be found in the "freshness of the performance" where in fact according to Ivens there is a "distance from the democratic ideal of collaborative performance": "He admits quite openly to manipulating and tricking his 'performers' into performing' and as to the results of their own performance" (Waugh 2011: 87).

The question is, how can we reconcile Ivens' insistence on naturalness and freshness (and they are some impressions that we have from the Lebowitz series) with Lebowitz performing essentially the same well-rehearsed role she has developed in other public shows and talks?

Lebowitz is able to convey a "natural" feel to her acting because performing without repeated takes is part of her show or series of gigs. Her work with Scorsese brings a natural feel to their collaboration as they know each other's ways of working and their work together has a feeling that comes from years of friendship and conversations together on and off screen. They are both skilled performers but performing (oneself) is not necessarily the same thing as acting. Sometimes the two roles coincide. Other times one takes over. It is the playfulness of the back and forth between performing and acting that gives the Lebowitz series its intriguing quality. One thing is consistent, though. They are never caught off-guard.

As we said, her persona is defined by a specific look, clothing, and set of behavior such as waking around, making comments on society, and creating an individual that exists only in the filmed locations of New York. The more she performs, the more she looks like a non-fictional person (a true New York City character). The more she looks like a non-fictional person, the more her audience expects her to perform in accordance to what she "is" or is perceived to be. As Kirby Dick has said about Jacques Derrida as subject of one of his documentaries, "Derrida must now contend with the existence of a virtual representation of himself" (Dick 2005: 47); so does Lebowitz now through Scorsese's filmic lenses.

## 3. SCORSESE'S *PUBLIC SPEAKING* (2010)

*Public Speaking* (2010) was filmed in various locations that include Graydon Carter's restaurant The Waverly Inn & Garden (at the booth facing Edward Sorel's *The Mural at Waverly Inn* that includes Lebowitz) in the West Village. It includes footage from an event at the New York Public Library in which Fran Lebowitz converses with Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, clips from public speaking engagements, and footage shot at New York landmarks such as the Grand Central Terminal clock. Lebowitz's comments include reflections on writing, the AIDS crisis in the 80s, Times Square, James Baldwin, Andy Warhol and his impact on celebrity culture.

Araujo and Scheider define *Public Speaking* as a "selfie-biopic" (2019: 104), rather than a documentary, since to them "the most intricate problem [is] to classify the documentary" (2019: 115). "She [Lebowitz] is the star from the beginning to the end, self-confident, delivering her lines as she was on the stage all the time" (114). "Having Lebowitz running the show was a very intelligent strategy by Scorsese, and also the most intricate problem to classify the documentary. Would it be considered a documentary when we do not have any testimony of anybody else except of she-herself talking about herself?" (Araujo and Scheider 2019: 115-116).

This production, according to Mangan (quoted by Araujo and Schneider), is in Scorsese's early documentary style with one point of view only, in this case, Lebowitz's:

> It's shot in the style of his early documentaries, *Italian American* and *American Boy* – energetic, sinewy, beautiful – but perhaps 'documentary' is a slightly misleading term. It suggests the existence, even the introduction of a point of view or two other [*sic*] than the subject's own, and when you've got a camera trained on writer, wit, raconteur Fran Lebowitz, there is really no room for such indulgence (Mangan 2011 online).


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Yet there seems to be an agreement that this production is indeed a documentary. *Vogue* editor André Leon Talley defined this production as an expression of Lebowitz's personality: "HBO's *Public Speaking*, directed by Martin Scorsese and produced by Graydon Carter, is a witty new documentary about what makes Lebowitz who she is" (Talley 2010: 176).

Other critics are less concerned with genres and focus on the main character. Bellafante observes that "she [Lebowitz] is, in a certain dimension of her sensibility, only one or two micromillimeters from Woody Allen" (Bellafante 2010: 1). According to Franklin, "Lebowitz is a monologist, a person not in search of meaning but in search of an audience" (Franklin 2010: 1). Shawn comments that

> Ever vigilant, she [Lebowitz] guards the toolbox of words. The ground of her being is her belief that the only way people can understand anything at all is through the use of language [...]. And so she watches (Shawn 2010: 235).

Patterson describes her as follows:

> Fran Lebowitz, ace epigrammatist, is further a first-rate conversationalist, a hall-of-fame bibliomaniac, a chronic self-caricaturist, a gal-about-town, the soul of the city, a snappish social critic, a snappy dresser, a popular emcee, a mandarin, a mascot, and the least-prolific great humorist of the American experiment (Patterson online 2010).

*Public Speaking* is mentioned as "a documentary profile premiering tonight on HBO. It's something of an anthropologist's recording of an idiolect, a bit like the project of a landmarks' preservation committee, and a lot of fun" (Patterson online 2010).

Sequence after sequence, *PS* gives us an introduction to the world according to Fran Lebowitz. Her rhetorical ability consists in assessing the world and turning her opinions into a controlled stream of consciousness. In an on-stage conversation with Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, Lebowitz is very candid about her lack of involvement: "I like doing this [public speaking] because this is what I always wanted my entire life, people asking me my opinion and also in this situation people are not allowed to interrupt so it's not a conversation; that's what I like about it. [...] I am always right because I am never fair" (*PS* 03:43-03:54 and 03:56-04:14).

The most significant art personality with whom Fran Lebowitz interacted in the 1970s when she moved to New York was Andy Warhol, although in the long run Peter Hujar and David Wojnarowicz had more influence on her. In *PS*, she explains that it was her writing on *Interview* that shaped her voice: "When I was young, my first real audience was with *Interview* magazine. At that time 99.9% of that audience was male homosexual and that audience was very important to me. This was part of what formed my voice" (*PS* 19:18 – 19:40).

Lebowitz however maintains a standard in her view of culture. Not everyone's story should become a story, nor can it have a universal appeal:

> What we have had in the last 30 years is too much democracy in the culture and not enough democracy in the society. [...] The culture should be made by a natural aristocracy of talent [...]. When Toni Morrison said "write the book you want to read," she did not mean everyone (*PS* 23:14-24:08).

Moreover, when Toni Morrison says how well she knows that art and education are not always well-accepted in the U.S. and asks Fran Lebowitz if this is a specific American anti-intellectualism, Lebowitz responds knowingly: "When they invented the term élite, they didn't mean rich, America loves rich people, they mean smart. We don't want any these élites here, we don't want any smart people in here" (*PS* 30:48 – 30:57). At the same, the belief that rich and smart stands in an equation is dismantled. As Lebowitz states, "The reason that most Americans think that the richest people are the smartest is that they've never met smart people and rich people, though never in one person" (Alhadeff 39). On top of that, as quoted by photographer and filmmaker Lauren Greenfield, Lebowitz dismisses the idea that the Americans' love affair with the rich will ever end: "Oh please, Americans do not hate the rich; they want to be them. Every American believes that they are the impending rich, and that will never change" (Soller 2018: 1).

The definition of artists, Lebowitz explain, can only pertain to specific groups: "To me there are only four kinds of artists: choreographers, writers, composers, and painters. What they do is make whole inventions. A movie director is part of a corporation" (Linville and Plimpton 1993: 165). Her point of departure for her argument on the matter of art is that "There is nothing new because the culture is soaked in nostalgia" (*PS* 01:11:11 – 01:11:16). There is also an indirect


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remark on the connection between nostalgia without the knowledge of the facts that are memorialized, so if someone is going to the exhibition of a young artist, while everyone could be saying, "this is amazing, [...] you look and thing, this is surrealism, this is one hundred years old. But you have to first know that, otherwise it seems like a new invention to you" (*PS* 01:11:38 – 01:11:47). Knowledge is gratifying, and "knowing everything is really pleasurable. [...] Especially watching people who don't know everything. I feel that I am at a stage in life that I would call, 'The Last Laugh' stage of life" (*PS* 01:20:20-01:20:32).

While what matters could be a matter of opinion, elevating moments in cultural history that seem to be more glamorous than the present is fairly common. Lebowitz is often asked if New York was better back then and in what way, and the response has to do with the gentrification of the city: "When a place is too expensive, only people with lots of money can live there, that's the problem. [...] You cannot say that an entire city of people with lots of money is fascinating. It is not" (*PS* 14:16-14:31). By watching *PS* alone, one could think that this is a well-done sketch of an interesting person who may or may have not more to say. It is a fairly complete piece in itself. The surprise is that it is just a prologue, like the pilot of a series that that nobody knew they wanted to see, until they did**.**

## 4. **SCORSESE'S *PRETEND IT'S A CITY* (2021)**

*Pretend It's a City* (2021) was filmed in 2020 before the pandemic in various New York locations that include the miniature replica of the Panorama of the City of New York at the Queens Museum of Art in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park (introduced in 1964 and updated in 1992, conceived by Robert Moses and built by Raymond Lester & Associates), the Waverly Inn, The Players Club in Gramercy Park, the New York Public Library, the area surrounding one of the five Picasso's busts inspired by Sylvette David, made in concrete and enlarged by architect I.M. Pei (who also designed the Silver Towers on Bleecker Street in the sixties), the Hess triangle, the Barthman clock, Calder's sidewalk on Madison between 78th and 79th, the Library Walk spread in numerous locations with various plaques of literary quotes, and various other places. Footage of Lebowitz in conversation with Alec Baldwin, Spike Lee, Toni Morrison, and Olivia Wilde, among others is also included.

*Pretend It's a City* is a Netflix Original Documentary Series in seven episodes. One of the unifying themes around Lebowitz is New York in general and her view on society, the human experience, as reflected in the visual arts and in literature. As Lebowitz says, "New York is never boring. [...] I'm sitting there, and I am just looking at my fellow man. And this is, most of the time, excessively interesting. Too interesting" (*PIC* 24:36: 24:08). The titles of the seven episodes are, "Pretend It's a City"; "Cultural Affairs"; "Metropolitan Transit"; "Board of Estimate"; "Department of Sports & Health"; "Hall of Records", and "Library Services."

An article in "Power of Women" featured Lebowitz and an interview about *PIC* where she mentioned "what type of production *Pretend It's a City* would be: a protracted one. 'Working with Marty, every single thing takes years,' Lebowitz says, cracking that she had to watch the show 'about a billion times' as he tried out different editing configurations" ("Power of Women" 2021 online). According to Berman, "No one enjoys Lebowitz's company more than Scorsese, which is presumably why he has done us the kindness of using his medium to share it. In their onstage Q&As, she reduces him to fits of giggles" (Berman 2021 online). Lebowitz adds that the series "It's basically about New York. So lots of it is Marty talking to me, interviewing me. It's not only about New York. He interviewed me on different subjects, many of which are New York," (Martin 2020 online).

About working with Lebowitz, Scorsese has commented:

> We always felt we should have topics. She'll start on a topic, and then it'll go off like a jazz riff into a thousand other places. Eventually, we might be able to pull it back. In a lot of the films I make, the types of actors I work with, the dialogue is like music — it's the timing and the emphasis. She has that (Itzkoff 2021: 1).

The structure of the series, however, as the episodes go by becomes so symmetric that there is a certain degree of reassurance in the repetition. As Panzer writes: "People who know and love Lebowitz will find this series comfortingly on-brand" (Panzer 2021 online).

There are various stories reported by Lebowitz about her interest in cinema and how it grew and impacted her life. The stories of the negotiations around her first published book also constitute part of her biographical narrative: she wanted to find the right venue for her first book, and the same ordeal was repeated with the second one as well. (It seems that in


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one of the publisher's meetings, someone jumped on the conference room table in the attempt of demonstrating how the book could be turned into a musical.) However, the narrative about insomnia in connection with the movie, *The Boy with Green Hair* (1948) and what prevented her from viewing films screened on TV in their entirety is perhaps the most amusing story in the entire series:

> When I was child, there was a tv show called *Million Dollar Movie* and it was a movie that they showed every day. They'd show the same movie every day for a week, so I started watching this movie *The Boy with Green Hair*. At exactly 7:30 about a half hour into this movie, I had to go to bed. [...] For the entire week, five days. I watched the first half hour of *The Boy with Green Hair*" (*PIC* S1:E6 17:41 – 16:35).

It took several years before she was able to watch the entire movie. Her passion for the literary texts and reading, however, is the most striking intellectual feature displayed in the series. "The second I learnt how to read it was unbelievable to me. [...] But reading [made] my world [...] a billion times bigger" (*PIC* S1E7 28:33 – 28:30). Lebowitz also relates that to her the first example of an intellectual operating in the public domain was James Baldwin with his compelling and authoritative tone.

In her conversation with Toni Morrison, Lebowitz shares quite a few sharp thoughts on writing. Not every idea should be put in writing and not everyone should write, because the pursuit of self-esteem should not be the starting point for over-sharing every single thought with a public. The idea of finding yourself in a book and inviting the reader in seems to be a point of debate between Lebowitz and Morrison:

> You should say "we," and I [Lebowitz] said, "why," and you [Morrison] said, "that invites the reader in." I [Lebowitz] said, "but I don't wanna invite the reader in. [...] I said, "I'm not a hostess. I'm a prosecutor. And you are a hostess, you want to invite them in." [...] Morrison: "I try very hard, I say, come on!" (*PIC* S1:E7 26:39 – 26:08)

Lebowitz always had the ability to see forward, even if, as she says, she was never as successful in school as she was accomplished as a writer: "It's not that I had a lifetime of success behind me that was buoying me up, but I just didn't think about it. I went to New York to be a writer. And that was it" (*PIC* S1:E2 22:15 – 22:05). Her parents did not try to dissuade her, but they were bound to a traditional view of the upbringing of a woman:

> People often asked if my parents wanted me to be a writer. No. Did they try to dissuade you? No. 'What did they want you to be?' 'A wife.' They wanted me to be a wife. They assumed that I would be a wife so they did not instruct me in anything other than things that would make me be a wife (*PIC* S1:E4 27:23 – 27:03).

In the end, a walk in New York with Fran Lebowitz seems to be the topic that most viewers grasped in *PIC*. Lebowitz has commented on this:

> New Yorkers have forgotten how to walk. One of the great things about New York used to be, yes, there were a billion awful people in the street but there was: every single person in the street knew that as you're walking toward other people, you move a little bit, they move a little bit. That's why everyone was still alive at the end of the day (*PIC* 22:39-22:11).

The conclusion is that walkers are not paying attention because they are either on their phones or because they live in a world of one:

> Sometimes I bumped into someone because they were not paying attention, and I thought, 'I'm gonna let them walk right into me.' They looked up, annoyed, and I said, 'Other people in a hotel lobby, isn't that astonishing? [...] And pretend it's a city where there are people who are not here just sightseeing, who have to go places, to their appointments, so that they can pay for all this junk that you come to see (*PIC* S1:E1: 22:04-21:23).

Lebowitz remarks that she may be the only person paying attention to the surroundings and life: "So now I feel that I am, by attrition, the self-appointed guardian of the City of New York, since I am the only one noticing anything" (Alhadeff 41). Perhaps the most striking image of the entire series is Fran Lebowitz walking through the Panorama of the City of New York at the Queens Museum of Art as if she were a giant woman overlooking (and loving, and judging)


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the entire city. Being the guardian of New York City is a job with no end in sight. Maybe that's the reason why there are rumors about a new Lebowitz-Scorsese series. Someone has to watch over the city.

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