



Antenna Documentary Film Festival 2025 Dudi Rokach's Opening Night Speech

Back in 2019, while working on ideas for my speech, I came across an article that caught my attention. It was called *What If We Stopped Pretending?* by Jonathan Franzen. The title alone intrigued me.

In the article, Franzen makes a bold argument: climate catastrophe is inevitable - so let's stop pretending we can stop it. At the time, this idea felt controversial. Greta Thunberg was everywhere in the news, climate protests were at their peak, and the message was clear. We must act now before it's too late. Franzen was telling us, *It's already too late.*

Of course, he wasn't suggesting we give up. His point was that if we stop pretending, other possibilities open up. Instead of clinging to illusions of control, he asks us to shift our focus—not on saving the world, but on what we can still save: our communities, our relationships, and the small, tangible ways we can make life meaningful in a collapsing world.

So after reading it I thought it would be interesting to explore — what role can we play in the lead-up to the apocalypse? I was excited to bring this provocation to you—but after I shared the idea with colleagues—I quickly realised... Apparently, existential doom isn't exactly the festival vibe.

This year, this article came back to mind for another reason.

As you may know, while writing this speech, I was also dealing with a challenge. This is the second year in a row that we've faced not just criticism, but public pressure and passionate responses to our programming decisions. But this isn't just happening to us. In the past few years, film festivals all around the world have found themselves in a new, unfamiliar territory. We, the festivals, are now facing strong expectations to take clear, definitive positions on complex issues.

I'm not surprised by this shift. After all, social media has spent almost 20 years training us to see the world in binaries—to turn every issue into a moral test, every space into a battlefield. But what I didn't expect is how emotionally charged these expectations have become. Because as I see it, there's a significant gap between the weight placed on festivals and the limited real-world influence we actually have.

Maybe this is happening because, deep down, all of us are starting to feel that real change—the kind that shifts power, policy, and history—has become almost impossible. And when we feel powerless, we turn to symbolic acts. And if there's one thing about symbolic acts, it's that they need a stage.

But here's the irony: We, film festivals, are now challenged because we have spent years telling people that we matter. That we are important. That we change the world.

I can't help but wonder—If that was really true, then why does democracy seem so fragile, and why is the far-right growing bolder every year?

In any case, the demand is understandable. If we claim to have this power, then it's fair that we're also held accountable for our choices.

So when trying to figure out how we even begin to address this, one thought kept coming back to me: *What if we stopped pretending?*

One of the first things I feel when I think of stopping pretending is a sense of freedom. But I don't mean it in a 'freedom of speech' kind of way.

I mean—it's less like the freedom we claim for ourselves, and more like the freedom we give to our audience. Not the freedom to say anything, but the freedom to step outside the comfort of certainty.

Because in a world that is increasingly asking us to pick a side, to declare, to be certain—maybe the most valuable thing a festival can do is to create a space that frees people from all of that. Our role, then, is to make room for openness. Or maybe, better to say—*Radical Openness*. And I say radical because this is not passive openness, like being neutral. It is an active, intentional way of engaging with the world.

Because the freedom I talk about can only appear in a space:

- Where contradictions and tensions are held with patience.
- Where unfinished thoughts are allowed to unfold.
- Where sitting with the uncomfortable is encouraged.
- Where disagreement is viewed as an invitation, not a threat.
- Where we don't have to perform as if we know.
- Where we no longer need to pretend.

In his essay, Franzen argues that rather than fixating on saving the future, we should focus on saving the present—our communities, our relationships, and tangible ways we can make life meaningful.

And isn't that exactly what a festival like us can be? Not a grand act of revolution. Not a platform for political messaging. But a space where something real can happen. A space that doesn't claim to change the world but, in its own way, makes the present more alive, more open—and, in a meaningful way, a little more bearable.

And maybe... that is a lot.