

I would like to start today's speech with words of gratitude to Zhanna Nemtsova and the "Boris Nemtsov Foundation" team for this opportunity and the invitation. I knew personally the late Boris Efimovich; we often met not only in Moscow but also in Kyiv, once during the so called Orange Revolution.

Nemtsov welcomed this revolution. He was confident that the people who came to the Maidan would be able to reclaim their agency and prevent Ukraine from sliding into authoritarianism. He was sure that by taking to the streets Ukraine will set an example for Russia, his motherland.

Remembering the difficult experiences of the 1990s, at that time, I disagreed with his outlook, I firmly believed in the possibility of changing the system from within. I believed that Russia could be changed through a free market and competitive business, and that, along with the opportunity to have Western living standards, the country would adopt the fundamental values of Western civilization.

I also had great faith in the power of culture. In its ability to influence people in the absence of censorship. To change them, so genuine values and ideals would be en-rooted and serve as a source of inspiration.

How criminally naive I was...

My speech today is by no means a lecture but an invitation to an open conversation. I would like to discuss some critical issues with you that are, in one way or another, related to the central theme of our meeting - the theme of freedom. And I ask for your understanding in advance for frequently referencing culture, specifically the cinema. After all, I am a filmmaker.

The massacre of peaceful Ukrainians in Bucha and other Ukrainian cities and villages deeply shook me. When I saw those images, I was left speechless and lost the right to speak about "Russian culture". At that time, I wrote what might be my most radical text: "After Bucha, one cannot speak about Russian culture anymore. It did not protect the Russian people from barbarism, brutality, and degradation. It is to blame. Everyone involved is to blame. A long path to redemption lies ahead. And repentance. It's too late to ask for forgiveness. No one is left to forgive. They were killed, raped, and thrown into pits in Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel...

I wrote these emotional words in April 2022, and I still feel this emotion. It is impossible to forget or forgive the deaths of the 501 peaceful Ukrainians executed by Russian soldiers in Bucha.

But since then, I have rethought my position on the role and responsibilities of culture. And not just Russian culture.

Rich cultural heritage - literature, music, cinema - did not save Germany from Nazism and Hitler.

Japan - from war crimes in China.

The United States - from wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The bombing of Belgrade.

Iran - from the brutal regime of the ayatollahs.

Mass culture, and I am primarily talking about it, cannot protect society on its own. It can only succeed when there is a conscious demand from the audience...

What people hear at school and at home, whether they have a habit of critical thinking or not - all of the factors are necessary for culture to nurture the spirit and help make a conscious citizen out of a person. And in turn to assist the citizens in creating functioning institutions that are the basis of a democratic society.

Pre-war, the most popular films in Russia were those from the Marvel universe or Star Wars, films whose primary, if not sole message was the absolute necessity for an honest person to resist evil and authoritarianism. Epic tales of resistance of an individual against the system...

But they didn't help, did they?

And the phenomenally popular books by J.K. Rowling, which taught readers of all ages the same thing, didn't help either.

From today's perspective, it seems to me that culture cannot save any country from moral decay.

But this doesn't mean I've given up on culture or become disillusioned with it. Culture is essential for those who make choices based on their consciousness. For those who reject the very idea of slavery, even premium-class slavery.

Russian writer Mikhail Shishkin aptly formulated this thought: "Russian literature did not save us from the Gulag, but it helped us survive in the Gulag-like country."

Once, in the youth magazine "Yunost" (and in my youth), I read an article by the famous physicist Feinberg about the function of art - it was a reflection of an essential societal discussion at the time about "physicists" and "poets".

One thought from this article stuck with me ever since and has never lost relevance: "Expressing an intuitive judgment can sometimes be very simple. For example, to say: true youthful hearts' affection for one another should not be hindered by family prestige

and enmity considerations; that awakened love is above everything. Such a dry statement has nothing to do with art. It can be right or wrong. You can try to prove it discursively, but that's a futile endeavor because many reasonable contradictory arguments can be made. However, when 'Romeo and Juliet' is created and this tragedy is performed by talented artists, dogmatic intuitive judgment acquires an entirely new level of persuasiveness; it becomes indisputable."

And it is true because only art can formulate rules for human life in a way that makes them commandments and not invitations to dispute. This was the function of art since the first man told his friend the first story at the campfire in a cave.

No matter how important and significant they may be, politicians' words are destined to be forgotten. Manuscripts and historical documents decay and are lost. History textbooks are rewritten, and each successive generation imagines the life of the previous generation less and less accurately.

Art has carried through the ages the values we consider immutable today. The human rights we consider inalienable. Our concepts of good and evil, our understanding of slavery and freedom. Art - not not church, state or historians.

The distance between Cairo and Jerusalem is 726 kilometers. According to Google Maps, a person can walk from one city to another in about six days. Yet Moses and the Israelites he led out of Egypt spent 40 years wandering in the desert. Why? We know the answer to this question.

A humorous version of it goes like this: "To find the only place in the Middle East with no oil or gas".

The real reason, however, is different: Moses waited for the last of those born into slavery to die because slaves could not build a free society.

After the beginning of war in Ukraine, this idea is perceived differently and here's why.

It's not just my belief; many respected authors and experts share the opinion that one of the reasons Vladimir Putin decided on the invasion was his age. The understanding of his mortality.

Vladimir Putin sees himself as the last representative of a generation that views Ukraine as a threat, and that can resolve, in their view, an existential problem for Russia and restore its former greatness.

Putin knows that no one but him would take on this task. He knows this from his own experience, from the "betrayal" of Dmitry Medvedev, who, as president, "allowed" America to kill Muammar Gaddafi.

Those born into slavery sometimes become the cruelest overseers on the plantations, and Vladimir Putin, born in the USSR, is now waging a war not just for what he believes to be foundational for the existence of a strong Russia but for the land of undreedom that he build and that is dear to him.

For Russia's right to be unfree and to erase the experience of the past thirty years.

Confirmation of this can be seen in the news from the front, where on the Russian side, the majority of soldiers in the war are middle-aged, often over 40, and sometimes even 50.

The younger generation of Russians at least partially, but was saved by the experience of free and semi-free life of the past three decades. Yes, these decades "gave" us phenomena like Stalinist schoolchildren, but they also nourished a generation of citizens who consciously refused to support the war.

This generation who, at home or in exile, is engaged in anti-war activities, helps refugees, and does its best to remain humane in the most challenging circumstances.

If Vladimir Putin had not started his war now, while those born in the Soviet Union could still hold a Kalashnikov rifle in their hands, it would have been too late. Because too many young people do not want war, do not want an empire, and, for some reason, just want to live a peaceful and prosperous life.

For those born into slavery, the price of freedom is still abstract because the concept of freedom itself is ephemeral to them. The very possibility of choice is ephemeral.

Vladimir Putin of 2022, or even Vladimir Putin of 2014, did not appear out of thin air; he was a political leader who had been in power for decades. And the moral compromises many of us made in the early 2000s significantly differed from the compromises of today. Back then, these were simple questions: to take the money or not; to speak up or stay silent; to make a small moral compromise or not.

In her very popular interview, Alexey Navalny's closest associate Maria Pevchikh calls on not only Russians but all of us to reject the practice of "moral relativism." In other words, to stop finding justifications for collaborating with a tyrant.

Is it possible to collaborate with Putin to save sick children? Or to create beautiful works of art that bring out the best in people?

Is popular actress Chulpan Khamatova guilty of supporting Vladimir Putin during the 2012 presidential campaign in exchange for saving thousands of children's lives with her foundation for fighting cancer?

This is the same dilemma, the "Price of Freedom"

The same question about the "teardrop of a child" that Fyodor Dostoevsky sought an answer to.

And it's a question I definitely have no answer to, and I suspect many others won't have a straightforward answer either. This question is not abstract.

With the onset of the war, the supply of many drugs to Russia, including life-saving ones, has stopped due to sanctions. Do Russian children with cancer deserve death? Or the elderly? Or people who haven't publicly opposed the war? Sometimes, those supplying medicines to Russia, willingly or unwillingly, violate sanctions. Moreover, sometimes, they are forced to collaborate with Russian authorities. All for the sake of saving lives. Is it easy in such a situation to say, "Let them die?". Of course not. Here it is—the price of freedom.

But it seems to me that when we discuss this issue, we miss the main point: if we find ourselves at the point where we have to choose between "supporting a tyrant" or "saving a child," then we have ALREADY lost.

This is the main thought I would like to share today in my speech. Our current historical experience provides us with some lessons for the future. Understanding what mistakes we can avoid to prevent finding ourselves in a situation where the price of freedom unexpectedly becomes catastrophically high.

How can a country that experienced the tragedy of World War II want to "repeat it"? But the answer is simple: the lessons of that war were not learned. Those who lived through the war understood this very clearly, and we know it from Soviet anti-war cinema and from the experience of living in the Soviet Union, where the words "just don't let there be a war" were said seriously and carried real meaning. Vladimir Putin's generation did not go through the war, did not know its sacrifices and tragedies, but knew the comfort of life as a proud citizen in a great empire. Lacking a genuine understanding, through personal experience, of the price paid by previous generations for building this empire, he was able to start a new war without any doubts.

Historical memory is crucial. We've all heard the cliché that history must be learned to avoid repeating its mistakes, right? It turns out that learning is not enough. Moreover,

individual act of heroism does not save us. Nor does personal principles. What saves us are the public institutions society should create, which Russian society willingly rejects. Today, dry accounts from history textbooks have become a painful and even tragic personal life experience. And this is our chance—to speak about our experience over the past years and to make every effort to ensure that it is not repeated. The world in which we all woke up on February 24, 2022, became possible not only due to the individual decision of one person. It resulted from all of the small compromises we made every day for decades. Compromises that seemed insignificant and unimportant but led to genuinely horrific consequences.

Bearing in mind that today's making a real compromise with one's conscience is impossible, we must also understand the unacceptability of these small compromises in the future.

I mentioned that among the generation born in post-Soviet Russia; many do not want to go to war and act more freely than their parents' generation. Much of this change can be attributed to culture.

Thanks to the books and movies I mentioned earlier, thanks to music and comic books. Yes, culture cannot save an entire nation from downfall, but it can help specific individuals - perhaps the best ones — to remain human. To be honorable and preserve dignity and maybe to have a chance to change the country in the future.

This is the historical role of culture. For centuries, humanity has been building its cultural "Noah's Ark", which can be used to re-build a healthy society after the next flood.

Great films and great novels provide viewers and readers not just with knowledge. They offer us an opportunity to live other people's lives, emotionally connect with the most critical events in history, and as a result - to change. To grow. To become better.

And here, it's worth noting that this function exists in high culture and mass culture alike - it's just a matter of a person's desire.

Today, I understand the imperfection of an approach based exclusively on the idea of change through culture, but I still sincerely believe that it is the culture that gives us a chance for the future.

Can it make people free? Help them understand someone else's complex path to freedom. For those who desire it - yes. Culture is not a defender or a teacher but it can be a partner in a meaningful conversation.

Several generations of my family have been involved in filmmaking. And the theme of freedom is incredibly important for cinema, including Hollywood cinema with its popular movies loved by millions.

And the way Hollywood cinema presented this topic sometimes caused some of us, people of my generation and life, to experience inner discomfort. We would slightly cringe when listening to monologues from characters like Aaron Sorkin's, the words of Mel Gibson's character from "Braveheart" - "You can take our lives, but you can never take our freedom" or the monologue from the President of the United States in Roland Emmerich's "Independence Day".

This heroic cinematic idealism seemed excessively grandiose to us and even caused a sense of awkwardness. Then, the war began. And unexpectedly, everything that we heard on screen about freedom and that had previously seemed «too much», too literary or too abstract turned out to be the most important truths.

The war brought clarity. Throughout my life, I have read a lot, including fiction and non-fiction, about World War II and the Holocaust. I read memoirs and inevitably encountered this sense of absolute clarity. The absence of any moral doubts. But this literary experience sounded somewhat artificial for me. I enjoyed perceiving and seeing the world as complex and morally ambiguous. After all, it is precisely this ambiguity that is being explored in the cinema I love, cinema that grapples with moral concerns.

Recently, in one of the interviews, I was asked if I understood how different Russians are? How many honest and conscientious people are among Russians? They asked with reproach, clearly suspecting that despite many years of living in Russia and having relationships with representatives of the cultural establishment, I had taken it upon myself to judge my former colleagues, neighbours, and friends.

This is wrong, I will never allow myself to "judge" anyone, but I see many things differently now. Today, Ukrainians and Russians have different emotional experiences. Let me explain.

February 24th changed our perspective forever. The war provided the utmost clarity, making the world black and white.

For the first time in my life, I understand everything about a person based on their position. I say this not as a condemnation but as a fact.

And unexpectedly, people you considered decent remained silent, living as if nothing had happened. Or, worse, they supported it. They cheered the invasion.

And those you suspected of cynicism and conformism suddenly turned out to be the people with a capital "P."

Ukraine is where I, my family, my parents, and my grandparents were born. We grew up and lived our lives.

Today, every Ukrainian (!) is mourning: a relative or acquaintance, a friend, father, or son. Mourning people who were killed, executed, tortured, died under bombs, died in captivity, forced to leave home...

I see this with my own eyes in Ukraine, I hear it from refugees, from military experts, from soldiers defending their country, from Russian prisoners speaking on Ukrainian television.

I hear sirens wailing across Ukraine, I know families who lost loved ones, and I attended the funerals of the killed in this war. Today, there is no Ukrainian who has not been affected in some way by this horrific war. Ukraine today is literally fighting for independence, for culture and national identity, for its language and statehood. And for Ukraine the price of freedom is thousands of lives of its best citizens.

Before the war, we thought about the price of freedom differently.

Definitely not in a practical sense.

So, what is the price of freedom for Russia?

I remember the 1980s and 1990s very well, and I remember — I saw it with my own eyes — mass demonstrations back then in the Soviet Union. Demonstrations for freedom, change and transformation.

And I am asking myself: what happened to these people? Why aren't they taking to the streets anymore? No matter how you look at it, the opposition rallies we saw in the past decade are a fraction of the Soviet ones...

Did the people asking for change and freedom just disappear? What happened to them? I found this answer for myself: in the Soviet Union we had nothing to lose. All of us, or more accurately, all of us back then, lived in more or less identical two-room apartments, received roughly the same salaries, stood in the same lines for Yugoslavian furniture, and traveled on the same trains and commuter trains to Moscow for sausages, that couldn't be found in stores anywhere across the nation.

The situation in Putin's Russia was fundamentally different: the prosperous 2000s raised the stakes. Now, Russian citizens have something to lose - a comfortable life with new, previously unseen opportunities.



Just think about it: in the history of Russia - throughout Russian history! - there has never been a period when such a large number of the country's citizens could live so well. Live in such comfort that they could to buy expensive things, travel, and plan a comfortable and secure future for their children.

Never before in history.

In the early 21st century, a large part of Russia's society traded freedom for prosperity. A comfortable present - that's the price of freedom.

Vladimir Putin's regime needed obedient people who would stop caring about the fate of the country, agree with the idea that «the rulers are not dumb, they know better», and focus on building their comfortable private lives and disengage from politics.

But he also needed the impoverished, who he convinced of a simple idea - it would be worse without me. Those who willingly went to fight in Ukraine because the conditions of utmost poverty that the people were forced to live in day to day outweighed the risk of death in war.

In the prosperous 2000s, we all had something to lose. For some, it was prosperity; for others, it was the ability to survive.

I regularly hear what I believe to be completely unfair claims that freedom is in the blood of Ukrainians while Russians are a nation of slaves. Successful Ukrainian revolutions and the simple fact that Ukraine has had six presidents in the last thirty years, while Russia, during the same period, had Yeltsin for eight years and then exclusively Putin for 23 years usually are used as evidence.

While this statement is wrong, the question remains. So why did Ukraine and Ukrainians succeed in building a functioning if not ideal democracy with a competitive politics and transition of power, while Russians did not?

The answer is quite simple: Unlike Russia, in Ukraine, influential regional groups were competing for power more or less as equals. None of them could decisively defeat the others. After several decades of political struggle, all stakeholders realized that it was easier to negotiate, compromise, and respect the rules of the game that applied to everyone.

The situation in Russia was fundamentally different: the absence of regional elites strong enough to be capable of not only defending their rights but also contending for power led to a situation where it was very easy for the center to buy or subdue all regional opposition and consolidate power.

We say that for freedom, you need to "fight," but unfreedom fights for us daily, offering us new and new little "moral compromises" that promise significant dividends.

Above, I used the word "slavery" in my speech. Let's return to it for a moment and remember what lies at the heart of this concept: a slave is not a master of his destiny; slaves hold no responsibility for their lives. It's the prerogative and privilege of the master. And it was precisely this idea that has proved so tempting for many of us - to shift responsibility onto someone else, consciously relinquishing responsibility for the country and all the hassles and difficulties associated with active political life.

Unlike freedom, unfreedom does not imply responsibility; it liberates a citizen from it, providing a comfortable sense of stability and tranquility in which individuals willingly delegate their fate and the fate of their country to their «superiors.»

Director Kira Kovalenko, with whom we co-created the film "Unclenching Fists," one of the winners of the 2021 Cannes Film Festival, often repeated in interviews a quote from Faulkner's novel «Intruder in the Dust»: "Few can endure slavery, but no one can endure freedom."

At this point I'd like to mention a great example, which I found in an interview with billionaire Andrey Melnichenko in the Financial Times. In it, I saw a reflection of the entire era of "developed Putinism." The interview paints a detailed complete image of a person of this era: very wealthy, highly educated, very intelligent, able to build a multi-billion-dollar business effectively, and yet highly infantile. A model of an unfree person.

Melnichenko says with resentment that he does not feel responsible for the war. In his understanding, it was not even Putin who unleashed the war - he consistently avoids mentioning the name of the Russian president - some global forces are behind the invasion, they provoked world leaders. Someone obviously smarter and much more competent than him made the decision because if someone has such power, they are, by definition, wiser and can see something hidden from ordinary mortals. Even billionaires. The expression «they are no fools» which is most commonly used in Russia to describe people in the position of power has become a refuge for millions because it relieved them of responsibility.

We do not know all the circumstances, so state affairs are beyond our understanding. Another familiar phrase: "It's not so straightforward." "We will never know the whole truth." In these words, millions also found comfortable shelter. By consciously and consistently complicating and muddling the world's picture, they absolve themselves of responsibility. Step by step, millions of people told themselves, "Why bother going to

elections? Our choice doesn't change anything anyway. And there's no need to protest against the war - we will never know the whole truth."

In that same interview, Melnichenko, when asked why he met with President Putin on February 24, explains to the FT journalist something that is very obvious to him: "When rockets and planes are flying, how could I not go?"

This is what I was talking about earlier: a person who consistently shied away from any responsibility for his country's life in peacetime does not feel it at the beginning of a war. Moreover, he does not understand that he has a choice at that moment. "If rockets are flying at a neighbouring peaceful country, how can I refuse and not go?"

Mentally compare this scene with the scene at Berlin airport when Alexey Navalny, rejecting Angela Merkel's offer to stay in Germany, boards a "Pobeda" flight to Moscow. Did he understand what awaited him in Russia? Without a doubt. So why didn't he do what Melnichenko did, choosing the path of least resistance based on rational considerations? Because he felt responsible for the fate of his country and understood the price of freedom, which honest people sometimes have to pay.

As I mentioned earlier, culture can become a companion for a nation and help those seeking answers. But this is not the only function of culture. It can be not only a companion but also a therapist. No, culture cannot protect people from brutalization, heinous crimes, poverty, and injustice, but culture can become an instrument that helps us avoid paying a terrible price for freedom in the future.

Answers to questions about the behaviour of Russians during the war are provided by Bernardo Bertolucci's 1970 film "The Conformist." "The Conformist" invites viewers to look at totalitarianism from a Freudian perspective. The origins of fascism are revealed in the lone individual's fear and desire to join the crowd. The weak hero becomes part of a strong fascist society and thus finds meaning in life.

Obedience is payment for psychological protection.

Or Zoltan Fabri's "The Fifth Seal."

In Budapest in 1944, one of the characters suggests a thought experiment to his four friends: "Imagine an island ruled by a cruel tyrant, a torturer, and a murderer. And there's a slave whom the tyrant subjects to cruel torment every day: he tears out his tongue, gouges out his eyes, rapes and kills the enslaved person's daughter and son. The enslaved person consoles himself with the fact that his conscience is clear. It never occurs to the tyrant that he is doing anything wrong... And now you have a choice—to become either

the tyrant or the enslaved person. Those are the only two possibilities. What would you choose?"

Three of the heroes admit that they would choose to live as the tyrant—after all, who would willingly choose the fate of an unhappy enslaved person? A random visitor to the tavern overhears their conversation and joins the debate, saying he will choose the fate of the slave. The four friends don't believe him, and the offended man retaliates by reporting to the secret police that the four friends are engaging in subversive conversations. The next day, all four are arrested and taken to the secret police, where they are presented with that very choice.

Then there's "Mephisto" by István Szabó. The main character, actor Hendrik Höfgen, who performs in the play "Faust," unexpectedly becomes popular among the rising Nazi authorities. While friends and colleagues flee Germany, unwilling to collaborate with the regime, Hendrik's insatiable ambition leads him to collaborate with the authorities, making him the director of the State Theatre in Berlin...

I mention these great classical cinematic works that offered insights to those seeking answers to the most important questions—about themselves, the world, society, and morality.

But these answers were available only to those who sought them.

It's easy to dismiss the examples I've provided by saying I'm talking about classical cinema that doesn't interest the mass audience. And perhaps that's true. However, popular culture, especially today, has long ceased to shy away from sensitive topics and serious conversations.

Leading American platforms and channels like HBO and Amazon Prime produce multi-million-dollar series that reach a broad audience and depict how easily a society can embrace fascism. They show how easily America can accept the existence of concentration camps and learn to salute in a fascist manner. Authors of series like "The Man in the High Castle" or "The Plot Against America" have spoken to the American audience about these themes.

And millions of viewers have watched these series. It's impossible to say that such conversations are a panacea, especially for a polarized country like the modern United States. Still, the mere existence of such stories can serve as a vaccine for millions of viewers who are ready for such frank discussions. Today, there is no historical crime, injustice, or horrifying chapter in the history of almost any Western state that hasn't

become the subject of exploration by the best modern authors, both in independent and mainstream cinema or television.

The ability to hear the truth, no matter how bitter it may be, is necessary—understanding one's shortcomings and acknowledging one's mistakes to correct them.

This, too, is the price of freedom. I am convinced that only in this way can we overcome the complexes of the past that pull us towards comfortable and peaceful unfreedom. And it is in this that cinema and culture can help us.

Since the times of ancient Greek tragedies, humanity has been watching, reading, and listening to stories about strong heroes who defy the gods and fate, challenging the preordained. This is important for novels and movies, but in real life, nations do not have a predetermined destiny, an inevitable ending, or a mission given by God.

We always have a choice, and there is always an opportunity to change our destiny and the destiny of our country - that is, to choose freedom.