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Synthetic Utopias and Subversive Spaces Alternate Realities in Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium* (2002)

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex interplay between spatiality, emotional suppression and authoritarian ideology in Wimmer's 2002 science fiction film *Equilibrium*. As a key example of early 21st-century dystopian cinema, this work reflects deep-seated cultural anxieties about the ethical consequences of unchecked biotechnological progress and totalitarian control. The story unfolds in Libria, a strictly regulated city where citizens are compelled to take Prozium, a drug designed to eradicate all emotional experience in order to prevent social unrest. Opposition to this regime is ruthlessly crushed by the Grammaton Clerics, an elite enforcement unit. Through the story of John Preston, a high-ranking Cleric who begins to feel again and ultimately rebels against the state, the study explores how chemical suppression serves as both a literal and symbolic mechanism of dehumanization. The paper equally argues that *Equilibrium* constructs two primary spatial imaginaries: the synthetic inner city of Libria, characterized by architectural homogeneity and affective sterility, and the subversive colorful urban area of the Nethers, that preserves fragments of human affect, memory and cultural expression. Through an interdisciplinary framework drawing from spatial theory and dystopian critique, the current research illuminates how these contrasting environments not only structure the narrative but also articulate a broader sociopolitical commentary on the cost of engineered harmony.

Keywords: dystopian film, emotional suppression, surveillance society, social conformity, resistance

1. Introduction

Within the expansive corpus of dystopian cinema, ranging from canonical works such as *Metropolis* (1927) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four (1984)* to more recent contributions like *Snowpiercer (2013) and The Giver (2014),* a central thematic preoccupation consistently emerges: the systematic erosion of individual agency under the weight of authoritarian governance or under (bio)technologically mediated forms of social domination. These films construct speculative futures or alternative realities wherein oppressive political

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systems employ various mechanisms such as omnipresent surveillance, neurochemical manipulation or ideological indoctrination in order to enforce compliance and to curtail both affective expression and critical thought.

Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium* (2002) emerges from this tradition as a cinematic meditation on the existential consequences of emotional erasure under a totalitarian, suffocating regime. In particular, the film's impressive thematic depth reflects a convergence of contemporary anxieties: the dehumanizing potential of (bio)technological control, the moral vacuity of bureaucratic frameworks and the erasure of individuality in the name of public order.

Equilibrium situates its narrative within the postapocalyptic city-state of Libria, where the pursuit of peace and stability is realized through radical affective suppression. Inhabitants are required to administer Prozium, a state-mandated neurochemical that nullifies emotional capacity, thereby eliminating the variables of love, anger, guilt and grief that historically incited human conflict. The city's apparent order is thus predicated on a denial of subjectivity itself, being reinforced by the Grammaton Clerics, elite operatives tasked with identifying emotional deviance and with neutralizing the so-called "sense offenders".

Libria functions as both a literal and a symbolic space wherein the state's ideological ambitions are inscribed onto the urban landscape. The geometrical rigidity of its architecture, the chromatic monotony of its interiors and the mechanistic comportment of its populace collectively dramatize a vision of synthetic utopia – an artificial harmony sustained by repression.

Yet, as the narrative unfolds, the viewers also discover spatial counterpoints to this dystopian monolith: zones of resistance, often clandestine and emotionally charged, where memory, art and affect still exist. These subversive environments serve not only as narrative catalysts for the protagonist John Preston's transformation from an instrument of the regime into its undoer, but they also function as symbolic reassertions of the human spirit. The interplay between these two spatial paradigms – the synthetic and the subversive – structures the film's exploration of autonomy, resistance and of the ontological significance of sentiments.

By interrogating *Equilibrium* through the perspectives of dystopian ideologies and spatial politics, the research seeks to reveal how this work's representation of alternate realities – manufactured and insurgent – offers a compelling case study in humanity's enduring negotiation between control and freedom, chaos and order, and between the mechanized self and the feeling subject. More importantly, the study will show that this cinematic creation affirms the irrepressible individual need for emotional expression.

2. Defining the Aesthetics and Themes of Dystopian Cinema

As cautionary tales, dystopian film often warn us against potential futures shaped by totalitarianism, by unchecked technological expansion or by the erosion of fundamental human values. These cinematic creations do not merely present alternate realities for entertainment; they challenge the viewer to consider the implications of certain political and technological frameworks when taken to their furthest logical end.

One of the defining features of a dystopia is the creation of a controlled environment in which individuality and freedom are systematically dismantled. The narrative arc usually centers on the protagonist's journey from compliance to resistance, from emotional numbness to awakening. As Rosenfeld (2021) observes, traditional dystopian narratives are

often constructed around an isolated, alienated consciousness, this singular perspective becoming a tool through which the oppressive order is both experienced and, eventually, resisted:

> In the classical dystopia the reduced, singular perspective is pushed to an extreme. The world is viewed through a singular lens – there is only one thinking, feeling character, and only one set of forces and outcomes for everyone. […] The world viewed from the singular perspective easily slides into paranoia – it is only a matter of time before the philosopher who stands on a hill gazing down at a world organized around his perspective finds himself in a ditch with the world staring back. (Rosenfeld, 2021)

In turn, Rodriguez (2010) outlines the core characteristics shared by many dystopian works, noting that they often take place in an imagined, challenging future that allows for an objective critical distance. Within this setting, authority is concentrated in the hands of a "semi-sacred" (Rodriguez, 2010, 166) leader figure whose cult of personality replaces traditional forms of religious worship. This sacralization of political authority acts as a tool for power consolidation and for the repression of dissenting voices. Such regimes typically rewrite or erase history, portraying the past as a chaotic era of war and instability. The present, despite its dictatorial nature, is thus constructed as a utopian alternative to historical catastrophe:

> First, the authority imposes various types of control on citizens' lives by using various ideologies such as corporate control through products, advertising, mottos and/or the media; […] relentless regulations, and incompetent government officials; distorting or eliminating past history; complete censorship and surveillance; scientific and technological control. Second, people in the dystopian society lose basic human traits such as freedom, individuality, love, family and identity. Third, the authority misleads people by claiming quest for perfection through achieving conformity and sameness among all people. (El-Sobky, 2016, 151)

El-Sobky (2016) expands on this depiction of dystopian domination by identifying three primary strategies through which totalitarian authorities maintain power. First, the imposition of various forms of control – corporate, ideological, technological – ensures that every aspect of the citizens' lives is regulated. These regimes often manipulate populations through relentless advertising and commodification, reducing citizens to mere consumers. Ideological supervision is reinforced through censorship and propaganda, while technological governance manifests in the form of invasive monitoring systems. Second, individuals within these societies are stripped of their essential human aspects such as freedom, love or identity, the power's imposition of absolute conformity eroding the possibility of a self-determined existence. Finally, the state enforces a deceptive narrative that promotes a false quest for perfection through homogeneity and sameness, masking the dehumanization inherent in such a system.

According to Moosavi (2021), the totalitarian power maintains control not only through external surveillance but by fostering a deep, internalized sense of mistrust among individuals. This breakdown of trust – even between close relations – serves as a powerful tool of psychological manipulation, ensuring that citizens engage in self-censorship and mutual surveillance out of fear. This internalization of surveillance reflects a key strategy of authoritarian systems, the erosion of personal bonds and the isolation of individuals thereby neutralizing the potential for collective resistance:

> The fact that no one is able to trust another person, even those closest to one, means that the totalitarian regime is trying to give its citizens the sense that none of their actions, or what they express as opinions, are, or can be, hidden from them, or remain unknown to the ruling power. This acute sense of being surveilled is, in turn, internalized to the point where one expects to be unable to trust their loved ones and acts accordingly. (Moosavi, 2021, 151-152)

In dystopian films, all these abstract concepts are made viscerally real through meticulously constructed environments that shape and constrain behavior. These controlled atmospheres, marked by repetitive structures and by the absence of color, all serve to communicate the lifelessness of a society governed by repression. Dystopian narratives frequently take place in futuristic cities, which are usually depicted as grim and oppressive settings where the imposing architecture reveals the absolute control of the authoritarian power. Instead of representing human achievement, these urban environments become emblems of surveillance, domination and emotional nullification. While cities are generally seen as the peak of civilization and technological progress, in these cinematic creations they morph into suffocating, prison-like spaces that deprive inhabitants of their individuality and freedom. As Daniel Ferreras Savoye observes, these urban landscapes do not serve the people but instead maintain the interests of the repressive system that sacrifices human values in the name of progress:

> The dystopian city brings together some of the most haunting notions put forth by contemporary science fiction, such as exploitation, alienation, dehumanization. […] The victory of reason and technology have come to mean the defeat of humanity and the corruption of its urban space, which has turned into the crucible of progress gone wrong. (Savoye, 2011, 147-148)

Thus, the city itself acts as a dystopian entity: not as a place of opportunity or connection but as a cold and hostile environment where the ideal of utopia crumbles into a bleak, mechanized existence. Its very design enforces conformity and heightens feelings of isolation and despair among its inhabitants.

On the other hand, science fiction films often portray alternative, visually striking spaces filled with color and joy, such as libraries or hidden rooms containing forbidden books or artworks, that serve to juxtapose the synthetic order of the impersonal authority with the messy, vibrant reality of human emotion and creativity. These marvelous spaces often become sites of subversion and resistance, symbolizing the enduring human need for freedom, expression and affective connection. They not only reinforce the critique of the regime but also posit hope: that even in the most oppressive conditions, the human spirit can resist and recover.

3. Sociopolitical and Ideological Structures in *Equilibrium* (2002)

Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium* (2002) constructs a dystopian society rooted in the aftermath of a cataclysmic global war, envisioning a world where emotional expression is rendered not merely undesirable but criminal. Through the narrative of John Preston, a high-ranking enforcement agent who transitions from loyal operative to insurgent, the film investigates the psychological and ideological consequences of suppressing the affective dimension of the human experience. *Equilibrium* critiques authoritarian control mechanisms and demonstrates how the repression of sentiments not only dehumanizes individuals but also erodes cultural memory, social vitality and personal agency. Preston's journey symbolizes the potential for emotion to act as a form of resistance, positioning feeling as both a political act and a form of subjectivity reassertion.

Equilibrium portrays a meticulously ordered totalitarian state – Libria – which functions on the premise that human emotion is the root of violence, conflict and collective collapse. Within the regime's ideological apparatus, feeling is pathologized and constructed as the singular cause of war and societal breakdown. This is clearly articulated in the opening voice-over of the film, which asserts:

> In the first years of the 21st century, a third world war broke out. Those of us who survived knew mankind could never survive a fourth. That our own volatile natures could simply no longer be risked. So, we have created a new arm of the law, the Grammaton Cleric, whose sole task it is to seek out and eradicate the true source of Man's inhumanity to Man: his ability to feel. (Wimmer, 00:39-01:39)

The ruling power constructs a historical narrative in which all global conflicts are attributed to unregulated sentiments. This altered version of history is circulated through visual propaganda – montages of nuclear bombings and of war-torn landscapes, images of totalitarian leaders such as Stalin and Saddam Hussein –, which is designed to justify total emotional nullification, to elicit compliance and to suppress questioning. Simultaneously, the power imposes a form of collective amnesia, the erasure or manipulation of cultural artifacts – books, art and music – being meant to sever the citizen's connection with the real past and to eliminate the emotional narratives that tie people to one another. By destroying these artifacts, the regime not only obliterates memory but reconfigures identity, replacing it with ideological conformity.

The state's authority is embodied in the figure of "the Father", an omnipresent leader whose visage dominates the public space through pervasive screens and whose discourse serves as the official voice of the totalitarian power governing Libria:

> Libria, I congratulate you. At last peace reigns in the heart of man, at last war is but a word whose meaning fades from our understanding, at last we are whole. Librians, there is a disease in the hearts of man, its symptom is hate, its symptom is anger, its symptom is war. The disease is human emotion. But Libria, I congratulate you for there is a cure for this disease. At the cost of the dizzying highs of human emotion we have suppressed its abysmal lows and you as a society can embrace this cure; it is Prozium. Now we are at peace with ourselves and humankind is one, war is gone, hate, a memory, we are our own conscience and it is this conscience that guides us to rate EC10 emotional content, all those things that might tempt us to feel again, and destroy them. Librians, you have won against all odds, and your natures, you have survived. (Wimmer 2002, 8:38-10:44)

In accordance with Father's legitimizing discourse, the suppression of people's sentient engagement is not only acceptable but morally imperative for collective survival. Such an engineered emotional stasis is ideologically described as the precondition for peace and existential security. Within this sociopolitical framework, affective discipline is not a matter of personal control but a legally mandated condition achieved through the compulsory use of a psychotropic substance, Prozium, that secures emotional uniformity and social docility. Refusal to medicate is designated a criminal offense, transforming emotive defiance into political insurrection. This compulsory administration of Prozium transforms human biology into a site of political intervention, the mechanisms of power functioning not solely through overt repression, but also through the calculated governance of biological existence (see Foucault, 1990).

The Tetragrammaton Council, named after the sacred four-letter name of God in the Hebrew tradition, adds legitimacy to the regime's claims of moral and ideological superiority (Tóth, 2009: 143). As Toth observes, the name "John" of the main character also has religious connotations.

> John means "the Lord is gracious" or "Yahweh is gracious;" secondly, the one among the twelve apostles whom Jesus Christ liked the most was John, the supposed author of the fourth Gospel and Revelation; and thirdly, John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus Christ who baptized him. These Biblical references imply that John Preston as the highest-ranking Grammaton Cleric in Libria has a symbolical significance in the evolution of the plot. (Toth, 2009, 141)

This symbolic alignment between religious sanctity and state authority sacralizes surveillance and unchallengeable control. Thus, the city of Libria becomes a space where sacredness and imprisonment coincide. Talking about this aspect, Tóth draws parallels between the city and various institutional forms that impose a deeply internalized regime of affective discipline through spatial and emotional regulation:

> [Libria] is privileged and sacred, and at the same time, a container of forbidden places. It is like a boarding school with military regulations and strict 'education'; it is like a rest home or a psychiatric hospital because people are drugged and treated; it is like a prison because people are closed, locked within this sphere where they are under close and constant surveillance and they have to keep strict regulations. Libria is like a library and/or a museum where the enclosed knowledge of all time and places can be found (though it is accessible solely to the privileged). […] Thus, it seems that Libria is eternal – an allusion to the Cittá Eterna. (Toth, 2009, p. 143)

Indeed, the geopolitical configuration of Libria reinforces the binary between compliance and dissidence. The city is physically and symbolically divided into two dominant zones: the inner city, representing ideological purity, and the Nethers, a marginal wasteland inhabited by the insurgents.

The inner city is a sterile environment dominated by towering skyscrapers with symmetrical design and austere surfaces. This cold architecture is an urban manifestation of emotional repression, being void of color, aesthetic variation or cultural memory. Rather than celebrating human ingenuity or diversity, it functions as a constant reminder of the state's control.

In this rigid area, surveillance is ubiquitous, being facilitated by massive digital screens that broadcast state propaganda and reaffirm the ideology of affective nullification. The central architectural monument, the skyscraper named "Equilibrium", houses the infrastructure for Prozium production and distribution. Its dominance over the cityscape symbolizes the omnipresence of the authority and the physical inescapability of the regime's reach.

The remaining public buildings, residential units and communal spaces are constructed with spartan minimalism, adhering strictly to functional requirements and systematically excluding any form of aesthetic expression. This enforced homogeneity shows how dystopian regimes utilize architecture as a tool for erasing personal identity and for promoting ideological conformity. The visual monotony of the urban landscape reflects the mental and emotional vacuity of the citizens, whose capacity for individual thought and feeling has been chemically extinguished. This affective sterilization is evident not only in the people's mechanized movements and in their detached interactions, but also in the city's artificial materiality of steel, glass and concrete, from which all organic life, such as plants and animals, has been systematically removed. In this context, the absence of nature functions as a visual and symbolic corollary to the absence of humanity.

While the state maintains a vast network of cameras, microphones and informants, the most effective form of control is psychological. Citizens are conditioned to police other people's thoughts and behaviors, and to report those who deviate from the norm – even if they are family members. Thus, the inner urban space emerges as a complex visual and ideological representation of psychological conditioning, systemic conformity and totalitarian domination, becoming a symbolic tool through which the regime exercises its power and enforces obedience.

Conversely, the Nethers serve as the spatial antithesis to Libria's orderly core, functioning as heterotopias in the Foucauldian sense – places of alternative consciousness that subvert the dominant territorial narratives. Located on the urban periphery and deemed lawless by

the regime, these zones are repositories of banned materials – books, artworks, music and other cultural artifacts –, being imbued with memory, emotion and sensory richness, qualities that the central city seeks to eliminate. Degraded, disordered and largely abandoned, these places resist the totalitarian aesthetic imposed on the inner city, functioning as a reminder of a world unbound by pharmacological control.

The regime's strict demarcation between "clean" and "contaminated" spaces reflects its ideological need to externalize threats. By designating entire zones as being beyond redemption, the state creates spatial justifications for its violence. Yet, the resilience of these subversive places and of the people who inhabit them points to an underlying optimism in the film's depiction of the city. While Libria represents a closed, totalized system of control, the Nethers symbolize the possibility of change and renewal. The fact that these zones persist, despite the power's efforts to destroy them, suggests that human emotion and cultural memory may not be so easily extinguished. They survive in hidden pockets, waiting to be rediscovered.

The spatial polarization between the inner city and the Nethers functions as a metaphor for the broader ideological division between repression and freedom, mechanization and humanity, uniformity and individuality. It is within this liminal space that Preston begins his emotional reawakening, experiencing for the first time the unfiltered world of affect and beauty.

4. John Preston's Emotional and Political Awakening

At the core of *Equilibrium*'s narrative is John Preston's gradual transformation, which serves as the primary conduit for the film's thematic development. As a senior Grammaton Cleric, Preston initially embodies the regime's ideal, being ideologically unwavering and lethally efficient. His earlier complicity is made explicit when he reports and ultimately consents to the execution of his wife for emotional dissent – a personal tragedy that he is, at the time, chemically incapable of mourning.

The catalyst for Preston's metamorphosis occurs accidentally: he breaks his Prozium vial and misses a dose. This lapse initiates a cascade of sensations previously unavailable to him – grief, awe, curiosity and eventually love. These feelings are reinforced through his contact with Mary O'Brien, a detained Sense Offender whose humanity becomes the mirror through which the agent confronts his own affective deprivation. Although their relationship is not deeply romanticized, her presence acts as an emotional touchstone, reawakening the protagonist's sense of empathy and moral responsibility.

The resurgence of Preston's memory and capacity for affection leads to a deeply personal confrontation with grief, loss and guilt, which brings about the hero's rejection of the state's moral codes. As his sensitive faculties gradually return, so does his ability to perceive the falsity and the brutality of the regime.

On the other hand, this regained sense of humanity allows the protagonist to engage with the spatial world on an affective level for the first time. Architectural forms that once signified only authority and control now acquire subtle textures, shades and emotional resonances that had previously been inaccessible to him. The rigid geometries and gray hues of Libria's buildings, formerly emblematic of repression, begin to reveal moments of unintended beauty, fragility and even melancholy. Thus, the city, once a tool of ideological containment, becomes a site of potential meaning and subjective transformation that responds to the interior life of its brave inhabitant.

Preston's subsequent journey through the contrasting geographies of Libria – from the antiseptic government chambers to the chaotic, emotionally charged Nethers – mirrors his internal evolution from conformity to resistance. These places serve not just as locations of rebellion, but as sensory archives that reconnect the protagonist with universal, suppressed human experiences. Through his contact with forbidden objects – a record player, a book of poetry, a painting – Preston reclaims a sense of self that had been denied to him by the authority.

In the climax of *Equilibrium*, the agent becomes the instrument of the regime's destruction, utilizing the combat skills he once employed for the state to turn against the system. These climactic sequences further highlight the symbolic function of the urban space. As Preston stages his final rebellion, he moves through an increasingly symbolic landscape from the bureaucratic sterility of the administrative offices to the ritualized arena of the Father's inner sanctum. Each location is laden with ideological significance, and Preston's traversal of these spaces becomes a form of performative resistance. By infiltrating the very heart of the regime's spatial order, he enacts an emblematic inversion of power.

Preston's confrontation with the authority is as symbolic as it is literal. He annihilates the mechanisms of propaganda, assassinates the central leadership and exposes the illusion of Father's presence. The destruction of the central command is not merely a tactical victory; it represents a spatial and ideological collapse of the totalitarian system. Thus, the hero dismantles not only the physical infrastructure of oppression but also its theoretical foundations. The protagonist's act of resistance is not simply a political rebellion but an assertion of affective agency – a demand to feel and to remember. It represents a restoration of aesthetic and emotional possibility, allowing the books, paintings and music – once forbidden – to re-enter the social sphere.

Equilibrium's concluding imagery contrasts sharply with its opening bleakness, suggesting that emotional liberation holds the potential to reanimate even the most desolate landscapes. In its final moments, the film gestures toward the reclamation of the urban space as a site of human flourishing. Although the city remains largely intact, the suppression it once represented is undone. This denouement affirms the idea that dystopian systems, no matter how comprehensive, contain the seeds of their own undoing. The very need to repress affection so thoroughly reveals its enduring power, while the return of feeling signals the possibility of a new social order built not on fear and control, but on empathy and complexity.

Through its architectural design, spatial hierarchies and symbolic contrasts, Libria exemplifies how urban areas in dystopian cinema are not passive backdrops but active agents in the perpetuation of a totalitarian rule. Yet, the film presents the dystopian city not merely as an agent of oppression but as a dynamic arena where the struggle between repression and liberation unfolds in cultural and psychological terms. By situating the protagonist's emotional and political awakening within this contested context, the cinematic creation offers a nuanced critique of authoritarian spatial logic and affirms the enduring possibility of transformation, both personal and collective, even in the most controlled places. Thus, *Equilibrium* stands as a touching reminder that cities, like the societies they house, are always capable of being reimagined.

5. Conclusion

Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium* articulates a profound critique of authoritarianism, emotional suppression and ideological indoctrination. Through its portrayal of a chemically subdued society and of one man's journey to emotional and moral clarity, the film foregrounds the significance of sentiments, insisting on the resilience of the human spirit.

The cinema work presents a multifaceted vision of a dystopian world in which the urban space operates not merely as a backdrop but as a central mechanism through which state control is articulated, maintained and ultimately contested. The city of Libria exemplifies a highly rationalized environment, meticulously constructed to eradicate emotional variance and to enforce collective uniformity. Through its sterile architecture, spatial segmentation and psychological conditioning, Libria becomes an embodiment of the regime's totalitarian aspirations. Its urban design is not simply about functional governance, but about the instrumentalization of space in the service of ideological objectives. Buildings stripped of aesthetic individuality, symmetrical streetscapes and controlled interiors reflect a society that privileges order over organic human expression. Citizens, conditioned through both pharmacological and environmental means, unwillingly become enforcers of this dystopian logic, performing surveillance on themselves and others in a closed circuit of control.

Nevertheless, *Equilibrium* does not rest solely within the depiction of repression; it constructs a counter-geometry of resistance through its portrayal of the Nethers. These peripheral spaces, laden with memory and sensory richness, function as heterotopias that resist the power's dominant logic. In fact, the regime's spatial policies – such as weaponizing architecture or isolating threat zones – simultaneously expose its vulnerabilities, the persistence of cultural artifacts and of subversive places revealing the limits of total control.

By mapping the ideological structures of Libria onto the physical contours of the city, *Equilibrium* emphasizes the extent to which space can be mobilized to condition behavior, to suppress dissent and to shape collective identity. Yet, in doing so, it also affirms the enduring potential of territorial transgression and of emotional revival. The city, even in its most dystopian manifestation, retains within its structure the latent capacity for human resurgence and transformation.

In staging the protagonist's journey across the contrasting zones of Libria, the film articulates a spatialized narrative of political and emotional awakening. John Preston's journey – his moving from the sanitized core of the inner city to its affectively charged margins – reveals the urban environment as a psychological map of his shifting subjectivity.

Through the symbolic reclamation of affective richness, aesthetic beauty and historical memory, *Equilibrium* positions emotion as both a personal truth and a revolutionary force. Preston's rebellion reveals that, even in the most repressive conditions, the capacity to feel remains an irreducible aspect of human subjectivity that cannot be entirely erased. The ending of the film offers not a utopian resolution but a moment of radical possibility. It affirms that the reawakening of emotion, however dangerous or painful, is also the first step toward rebuilding a fractured world.

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