



S. FISCHER VERLAGE

Aki Mira

Proxi. An Apocalyptic Utopia

September 2024. 336 pages

- Awarded the Kurd Laßwitz Prize and the German Science Fiction Prize
- Visionary, queer and wildly entertaining

"I have seen the future of German science fiction." – Horst Illmer



A post-apocalyptic roadmovie

Proxi is a virtual reality world in which people can live a second life, adopting a different identity. When Proxi is paralyzed by a virus attack, for many it marks the loss of a world, a loss of a part of themselves.

Three very different people – a trans female singer, an e-athlete with social phobia, and an A.I. in a synthetic human body – go on a journey to find a hidden backup copy of Proxi, setting out to save the virtual world. They embark on a roadtrip through a Germany changed by climate crisis and illegal biohacking. The three of them must learn to trust one another.

On their journey, they come across different communities, and new plant and animal species. In a rainstorm, they lose everything and are put to the test. One of them has been lying to the others from the very beginning: Dion, the embodied A.I., wants to destroy, not save, the virtual world.



Aiki Mira studied media communication in London and Bremen and researched gaming. Today Aiki lives in Hamburg and in the world of science fiction. Aiki's short stories have won several awards.

As a non-binary author (no pronouns), Aiki explores the boundaries of our relationships and human identity and enjoys writing, thinking and discussing queer topics.

An English translation of Aiki Mira's short story »A Step into Emptiness« will be featured in the anthology »Amplitudes: Stories of Queer and Trans Futurity«

Aiki Mira is represented by the literary agency Gaeb & Eggers. Film and foreign rights are handled by the S. Fischer Agency for Film & Foreign Rights

Synopsis:

Tell is a courier, but his real life takes place in the virtual world of Proxi, where he is Monae, a famous performer.

Kawi used to be a successful gamer, but is currently just about scraping by with her proofreading job. Her only consolation – her purpose in life – is her second existence as a panther in Proxi.

For both of them, Proxi's destruction by a virus is a catastrophe. They decide to set off with a SolarCamper to find a hidden backup copy of the virtual world. At the very beginning of their journey, they pick up Dion, a biosynth who escaped from a secret Bot'Niza laboratory. Neither of them know that Dion is responsible for Proxi's apocalypse, and is secretly planning to destroy Proxi entirely.

The three of them journey through an inhospitable landscape known as Proto, which is largely made up of "plasse", or plassegglomerat. (Proto was under the sea, which has since evaporated. All that remains is plastic waste.) In true road-movie style, they encounter several quirky, fascinating characters on their journey: a hermit who lives alone with her pack of dogs in an old plane wreck; a community of dropouts who try to make Proto fertile again, and who gift them three seeds; a post-apocalyptic theater troupe that manages to partially reconcile Tell with his alter ego Monae in the real world; and a colony of solar trolls who persuade Kawi to play a VR game with them. The travelers are followed by several of Bot'Niza's vehicles. A confrontation ensues during a cataclysmic storm, but they manage to escape.

They finally reach their destination: an old oil drilling platform, below which the server archive is located in a bunker. The original human crew has been killed off by a group of biosynths, who have set about connecting the virtual worlds whose backups are stored there.

Dion, Tell and Kawi enter a duplicate version of Proxi. But instead of destroying it (Dion's plan) or killing themselves in the process (as Kawi had

expected), they manage to "reconnect" the copy to the network, simultaneously weakening the borders between the other online worlds. The result is a new kind of virtuality that is more open to the future, and whose structure incorporates the experiences the three protagonists have had in Proto (the real world).

Sample Translation: Charlie Wührer

© S. Fischer Verlag GmbH

HE HAS ONE MINUTE LEFT of his vaping break. With tears in his eyes, the propylene glyco fumes blurring his vision, Tell vapes until the time is up. He stashes the small gadget away in his breast pocket, and heads to his motorbike. He'd parked it between two apartment blocks to protect it from the heat, but the buildings in this city give off more heat than they absorb. He briefly considers not wearing his helmet. But then his health insurance wouldn't pay out. Accidents happen. Are constantly happening.

He feels the inside of his helmet. Rats sometimes hide out in it from the midday heat. But it's safe. He hoists himself onto the saddle and pulls on his helmet. The filthy inner padding envelops his head like a mighty hand. He starts the motorbike, takes a moment to listen before setting out. The crackle of the engine overlaps with its own echo, which bounces off the building walls. It sounds like the lapping of the sea. He smiles into the gloom of his helmet, and on a whim, drives another lap. When he stops, he casts a searching eye over the dark windows of the buildings. He finds it disturbing that no one lives here, that it's only the buildings watching him. A pleasant voice in the headset gives him his next assignment. He has been working as a city courier for six months, transporting sensitive data on a chip in his body. The requisite operations were outpatient and painless, and the job pays well. He can use the money to support his sister and niece, and at night he is free to live his life. As he drives around humming to himself, he works on new song lyrics and melodies.

On good days, he is a charming courier. On bad days, he's just the guy standing in dark hallways, squinting into sudden light spilling from opening doors.

Racing down streets, completely alone, he fantasizes about walls appearing. About crashing into them, his body contorting, detonating on impact. He saw accidents like that in Mumbai every day. It's why his sister was against the courier job at the beginning. Too dangerous.

"Sus, the only dangerous things are my thoughts," he retorted. "The traffic is almost entirely automatized."

Without warning, he takes off. Pink clouds drift past like cotton candy. He loses control. The world somersaults, unbearably slow. His body slams against stone like surf. He froths.

Afterwards, he buries his face in his folded arms, and listens in the cave between his head, arms and chest. He waits until his heart slows. If he were to hold out his hand, it would tremble.

At night, he starts coughing. He inhaled too deeply during the day. He doesn't wear his respiratory mask often enough. His sister applies creams to protect and heal his face. He cooks for her, singing to music playing through his headset. His niece draws him a picture. Still, he never stops dreaming about the night, when they're all asleep and he can finally be alone. He's ashamed about his thoughts, and sits silently with them at the table, hating himself.

After dinner, his niece gives him her finished picture. On it, a metal strap decorated with nuts and bolts is wrapped around a larger-than-average head. A self-portrait. Since Tell saw the first flower fields in Proxi. He's fantasized about there finally being VR goggles that fit his niece's head, so she can walk through the flowers too. Proxi has spread through Tell's life more completely than microplastics through his bloodstream. As a new citizen of Europolis, all he has left is Proxi. He can't get a residency permit for other virtual reality worlds. He can visit neither virtual Mumbai, nor the virtual representation of his homeland. Destroyed by war and climate catastrophes, it still exists virtually, but it's inaccessible to him. Proxi is the only digital world he can enter.

After he's cleared the table and tidied the kitchen, he goes into his room and dons his VR goggles. The first thing he does in Proxi is take out a pocket mirror and look at his face. There's nothing better in virtual reality than looking into a mirror. Framed by a golden oval, he sees Monae, made up with toner, serum, eye cream, moisturizer, primer, concealer, foundation,

eyebrow products, and highlighter. Gold-framed perfection: magniv Monae. Proxi phenomenon. Virtual reality star.

"Amore amou, we can't see each other anymore."

Every time Monae rejects a digital lover, she watches them use her painful rejection for their own great personal narrative. Monae envies people who can do this, envies them the stories they have about themselves. She's sure that there'll never be a single great story about her. Tell's head is far too fractured for that. Outside of Proxi, Monae exists only as glittering splinters. Shards of a life.

When Monae's lovers ask what she wants out of avatar sex, she says she wants the same as everyone else. She wants to discover something about herself. She doesn't tell them that there's nothing there. Only a shattered surface, and beneath it, a vacuum, an empty space onto which people can project all kinds of things. Monae detests Tell's analog body with its fuzz of little black hairs. She is horrified every time she looks down at himself from above as he lies in bed at night, running his hands over his body, hoping to find Monae under his skin, a second proliferating layer of human tissue.

Tell's constant anxiety makes him afraid that he's inherited his father's delicate state of mind. His head feels like a motorway with vehicles speeding along it. If a single one were to lose control, there'd be a blood bath – both in his head and beyond it. Tell takes a break from Proxi in the early hours of the morning in preparation for the upcoming concert. When he returns from the virtual world, he sees Monae in every reflective surface, in faucets, in panes of glass. In the bathroom, he sits under the stream of the shower and shaves his legs. His sister comes in without knocking and sits on the toilet before him. He pulls his knees towards himself. Water sloshes onto the cracked floor.

They watch as hair speeds towards the cracks and clogs them. They fled to Europolis together ten years ago, and painstakingly taught

themselves Mush, taught themselves how to start a new life. They drifted apart in the process. They're a long way off from feeling at home.

Tell sings softly to himself. He holds the notes shakily, and releases them freely.

No one has ever heard this song before.

"Sus, it's not Proto Soul or Climate Disco," his sister says. "You don't sing songs from this world, and you never know all the lyrics."

"It's Monae," he whispers.

MEANWHILE, two kilometers away, Kawi faces her greatest fear. On the twentieth floor of a formerly fifteen story tower block, half biotech farm, half residential complex, Kawi looks out of the window. She has not left the building in ten years. Since last year, she no longer even uses the stairs. The more time lapses, the more threatening the outside world seems. All she has to do to survive is open the window and let in a delivery drone. Sometimes Kawi's grocery deliveries end up on the wrong floor, or even in the wrong tower block. It's annoying. But not tragic. Definitely not a good reason to end her own life. Still, Kiwi is thinking about it, like a sentence in which she must look for mistakes. She's good at finding mistakes. As a human proofreader of AI translations, she's at the top of the proofreading pyramid, hunting down errors that are almost impossible to find in technical descriptions, legal documents or research reports. Kawi is good at immersing herself in things without touching them.

"Fuck Mashara, should I end it?"

She thinks about it out loud, and can't find any mistakes. Ending her own life seems like a legitimate desire. It doesn't make her despair. She despairs about other things: rising electricity costs, translation programs that are constantly improving, the never-ending filth.

Thinking about something doesn't mean actually doing it.

For Kiwi, life consists primarily of ruminating, of little problems, and of unfathomably great misfortunes. Such as the slow demise of the planet. There is still a sky on the other side of the window, but it's marred. Chemicals intended to lessen the greenhouse effect make it appear as white and flat as Kawi's screen. The sun behind it is too hot, the rain too heavy. Kawi is witnessing the planet considering, loudly, its own death. Kawi's train of thought seems very quiet in comparison.

She gets up and opens the window. She has to practice this action every day, or else she'll soon become incapable of doing it. She flinches away from the breeze that blows in. It's instinct. She doesn't want contact with the outside world. She casts a quick glance down at the street and the courtyard, at a life without walls. She falters. A piercing cold shoots into her head. She's gripped by a panic that feels like a night that devours everything, light and oxygen. Kari staggers back. The panic reminds her that it's impossible for her to know herself. Even now, at forty years old, she can't say who she is. So much remains in the dark.

"I can do anything under the right conditions. Just like everyone else."

She no longer believes in a single immutable self incapable of killing.

With wavering steps, she drags herself to sit at her work station. The window gapes behind her like the maw of a predator. She runs her hand over the gel mouse pad. Until recently, she'd had ten gaming accounts. Just managing the monthly subscriptions alone could have filled a job position. She'd lost track long ago, and had run herself into debt. Her hand twitches at the memory of opening the accounts. Yesterday, she deleted her account log-ins and deinstalled the games. Kari knows that it's not enough to put an end to her addiction. She's only made the first step. Her hand – her entire body – will need a long time to process it.

Her job as a proofreader pays her well enough to ward off the worst. She's come to terms with the fact that she'll never be debt-free. It's not the debt or the addiction that wears her down. She finds the pervasive grime

much worse. It makes no difference how much she tidies, cleans or washes, nothing stays clean. The thought drags her down now, becoming a running commentary in her head. She's being held hostage by her own dangerous mind.

Playing games had felt like an escape for many years. But in order to join the addiction program, she's had to block all her gaming accounts. The only thing she has left is Proxi.

She takes her VR goggles, then pauses. For a moment she just sits there and marvels. Then something moves inside her, coming alive, if only briefly. The feeling of potential. Something she's felt before every game. With this feeling, she puts on the goggles and leaves her world. Immerses herself in another.

IT'S LIKE A MAKE-BELIEVE WORLD. A place where nothing ages, where the temperature is always pleasant, and everything left behind is frozen in time. Every time Kawi enters the world, it feels as though the world changes from black and white to color. So much green and blue. The sun – usually a weapon – has a face in Proxi. The grass greets her, every blade bowing to Kawi. A dense forest, silent and scentless. Sometimes Kawi gets lost in it, disappearing for days on her forays. It's a place where wishes come true.

Proxi is a world before the climate crisis, a world brimming with life. Here, Kari inhabits the body of a black panther. Her eyesight is six times better, and she has an superb sense of smell. She can run faster than sixty kilometers an hour.

What do feline predators dream of?

Kari is convinced that the dream worlds of animals are filled with both pleasure and pain, like her own. But instead of language, they consist of scent and sound, of the push and pull of matter, of heat and cold.

As soon as Kawi's panther body starts racing through leaves and branches, everything – everything! – seems familiar and magical at the same time.

Living as a panther avatar is as effortless as typing very fast. Kari thinks about moving, and her avatar moves without her really being aware of it. Kari never feels like she's doing. She's simply existing.

That's flow. A focus so sharp that all distractions vanish, even the ego itself. Kari no longer has to think. She just knows. She controls the avatar like no one has ever controlled it. When she gets into that perfect rhythm, performing sudden panther leaps, she feels like a VR shark in a VR pool. Complex things become easy. Of course.

In her first competition season, the word she heard most often from her teammates was "passionate." Another word: "strong." Her team seemed to value Kawi's passion. But Kawi didn't want to play passionately. She wanted to be as aloof and sharp as the legends she most admired. It was a shame that her aloofness was a mystery only to men. To female gamers, she was regarded as being cold.

Kawi pauses, concentrating. A crack. Her panther eyes zoom into an increasingly high-resolution image of trees and leave. A wasp, chewing up wood for its nest. Kawi has often watched the wasps. A bird hops across the grass, unbearably loud. Kawi adjusts the background sounds, and then climbs a tree, agile, jumping from branch to branch. When she slips, she starts again. She hears the scratching of her claws on the wood, and she is sure she can feel the panther's physical exertion making her body slower, every movement tougher. Kawi thinks about weights. She has training weights permanently attached to her human body, and she thinks she can feel them now. She works her way slowly up the tree. She enters a flow state. A perfect, self-eliminating focus. Her avatar reacts, trembling. Later, when she returns, her other body will need sleeping pills. A ray of sunlight grazes her. Kawi thinks she hears it fall. And now she falls herself, landing softly on the grass.

She achieved everything in gaming that she set out to do. But right now, in the body of a panther, she feels compelled to attribute her successes to a perfect team. Or, even worse, to luck. But she's no longer fourteen. At forty, she doesn't have to worry about others feeling comfortable around her. In the end, it was all her. Her victories don't have to mean anything to anyone else. Kawi was number one. The best there ever was. Even when she falls, she's the best.

A shadow races towards her. This isn't a VR quirk. It's a program command. Kawi becomes disoriented and loses her sense of what's up and what's down. Walls appear. Walls she needs outside of the VR world, but avoids in Proxi. Everywhere she looks, there are walls. She's trapped. The message flashes up, short but clear: "You belong to us now. Resistance is futile."

IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD OF PROXI, everything has a surreal, cinematic intensity. Monae's concert is no exception. Post-industrial ruin meets psychotic dream-hallucination. In dingy, damp factories, exotic flowers push through the walls and roofs. Gigantic birds circle the crowd like angry reptiles from an alien planet. And shooting up like a jet of water in the midst of it all, a glass stage.

"This is for magniv Monae," the hunters call. The women are dragging a cage, and have rifles slung over the shoulders of their avatars. Dion furrows her massive avatar forehead, reaches out an enormous hand, and takes the cage. Dion's Proxi avatar has the stature of a heavyweight boxer. Its chest and arms are hyper-muscular. The right hook has a punching force of 560 kilograms, but the left hook is even more powerful, at around 780 kilograms. Dion is happy to get time off occasionally to work as a security guard at Monae's concerts. While others visit this world voluntarily, Dion is trapped here, and no one cares. If they knew about Dion's body – what Dion really is – it would put an end to their indifference. Dion has seen the videos. No: she was shown them, to make her understand why it's best to keep silent about everything.

She glances into the cage. The perfect simulation of a black panther cowers behind virtual bars. Its fur glistens damply, and its eyes glint gray. Its body is smooth and muscular. Not a bot; probably human. Dion is too smart to say it out loud. She's just here to carry out an assignment. The electronic ankle tag marks her.

Perhaps, she thinks, the panther deserves its fate. Or not. It makes no difference to Dion. The virtual latch of the cage automatically mutes the panther, which is more convenient for transportation.

Dion carves her way past people and bots to the back of the stage. The audience cheers up front, but it's strangely quiet backstage. The stars' caravans have been set up here. Dion heads straight for the elevator, which takes her to the stage platform.

When the door opens, she sees Monae. She's a few meters away, wearing a long, transparent robe that flows down her perfect, ambiguous body. Tiny human-like avatars with wings buzz around Monae's face, creating new make-up filters in real time. No one pays attention to Dion, the burly man carrying a cage. Dion spots a lion avatar sitting motionlessly. No cage. A flat, colourless simulation breathing jaggedly, blurred at the edges. In vivo. Dion knows it's not unusual for humans to torture A.I.s, and bots are the simplest A.I. there is. But Dion doesn't get why humans torture other humans. What's the plan with the caged panther? If Dion were to release the panther, it would make an immediate run for it, and chaos would ensue.

"The lion for the first song, and the panther for the second," the stage assistant orders curtly. Monae is already on stage amidst a storm of applause and cheers. She opens her mouth. And then something tugs in Dion's chest.

Monae's voice flows into her, and for a moment, she can't move. Her song is a sensual, breathy sigh. It reminds Dion of brain-stimulating streamed whispers of ASMR. It's not the first time that Dion has heard Monae sing, yet every time it feels the same.

The lion creeps towards the stage with angular movements. More singing, more tenderness washes up in gentle sound waves. Dion is riveted to the spot.

The song fades, and the spell breaks. She is given a sign, and carries out the cage. The spotlight has been turned off for the scene change, and the only light comes from Dion's flickering electronic ankle tag, as ugly as an infected eye. Monae stands mid-stage, surrounded by thundering applause and whistling. An anticipated avalanche. Weather chaos. Climate spectacle.

Dion hurries to place the cage next to the VR star. She wants to leave, but she's held fast by the signer's gaze.

"Sus, what is this?" whispers Monae.

Dion could pretend she doesn't know. But why should she lie? Lies are heavy. They're not part of the job. "An illegally hunted in-vivo avatar."

Monae grimaces "Eish! Release the panther."

Dion thinks she's misheard.

Monae points impatiently at the cage. "Go on. Enter the code."

"It's not that easy."

"Bã, just enter the code, and the door will open."

"Sus, how do you know I know the code?"

Dion feels a twinge in her back. It's the nerves. She shouldn't still be here. The stage lights are about to come back up. The concert has to go on. She's gripped by a strange tension.

"Wesh, bre, wesh, let the predator go."

It sounds like an order. Dion bends over the cage. She doesn't have the code, but she knows it anyway. She knew it as soon as she was given the cage. Information – everything in Proxi is pure information, and Dion

has the ability to see and alter it. No one taught her. It's like maths. Logical. Inevitable.

The generator turns on. She enters the code and knows it will work.

Could it be that she knows the code for her own electronic ankle tag? What a thought!

What if she were to break open this world bit by bit? Break it down?

The cage opens, and the panther glides out like a flame. A wave of electricity.

For a moment, everyone freezes. Monae. Dion. The panther. The audience. As though no one can believe what's happening. The panther leaps towards Dion. Dion takes an automatic step back, and shields her face with her gigantic avatar arms. But the panther doesn't attack, instead landing directly before her. The predator's paws flex, claws retracted, and it slinks around Dion's legs like a pet cat. Monae laughs. It sounds like clear water. Dion looks up. The singer winks at her. "Wesh, bre, wesh, the panther is thanking you."

Dion feels the eyes of the audience on her. She's glad she's concealed by her avatar body. She looks down slowly and lowers herself to her knees. The panther pauses, every muscle tensed. Dion senses that it is just as scared of her as she is of it. Their eyes lock. Are you like me? The passing thought is immediately dispelled by the tension building in the live audience.

On her knees now, Dion can look straight into the panther's eyes. Monae puts an arm around Dion and the other around the panther. She sinks to join them. Looking from one to the other, she smiles. Contact established. Exchange of data authorized. Real names transmitted. Addresses in Europolis released. Distress signal codes disclosed.

A contact to the outside world? Dion is overwhelmed by the possibilities – by the trust. She sends incorrect data, of course. She's been

taught to do so from a young age. Unlike Jasvir and Eyumi Kawasaki, she has no real life out there.

Monae cracks a joke for the crowd. Avatars applaud. Dion no longer hears it. Suddenly everything inside her goes silent.

Applause. Monae moves towards it, and is met by a hard wave of sound and light. Spotlights light up directly above her. Make-up filters bloom across her face. Painful. Beautiful. Then a movement: the panther prepares to pounce. There's a scream from the crowd. Monae's voice cuts through it, bright and clear as a blade.

Dion tumbles from a dream, as if she's just woken.

The panther crouches low and then leaps, front legs airborne, long hind legs stretching explosively, catapulting itself into freedom.

Its jump and Monae's voice cut something inside Dion, freeing a shackle that feels like an organ.

Dion recognises the beauty in the cut, and with her mind, makes it wider, bigger. A torn seam in the fabric of Proxi.

What would it be like to unravel the seams of an entire world?

Dion thinks of the necessary code, precise and radical, and searches within herself for something she can repurpose as a vehicle, something to inject every seam of the new program, twisting its pixels apart.

Her program reads Proxi as an organism made up of interlocking molecular chains. Once released, the program will become a vacuum tearing apart the chains, causing chaos. No one will be able to reconstruct the world afterwards.

It begins with a tremor in the air. The atmosphere seems to become denser, meshing into a tangible fabric. Kawi leaps against it and then sinks in. Monae's voice is swallowed up. Sound can no longer travel, moving becomes unbearably hard.

The vacuum becomes an invisible force, stretching the fabric of the air. No one can see where the push and pull comes from. The stage begins to sway.

Then, a flickering: colors blaze like fire, burning into each other, dazzling. Intense pain. Eyes no longer seeing. Instant blindness. Bright light paralyses the body, becoming a siren in the head. The panther lands on the stage and tenses with a snarl. Monae shields her face with her hands, doubles over, and collapses.

A hiss makes air and color foam up hot, bleed out. Avatars bump into each other. The stage seems to sink into the ground.

Everything loses its solidity. Borders liquify. Monae's legs flow away. The panther's skull expands, only to then contract faster and faster.

A vortex. Dion thinks. My brain, wrapping itself around my esophagus. My neurological tissue, spreading into my extremities, giving my arms and legs their own sensors and control systems.

She can finally feel her own body again, the body out there.

A spiral, turning tighter.

A concentration.

No more space. Nowhere.

A whole world shrinks to a single point. Dion's thoughts, her brain, her code wrap around it. Spiraling. Tighter and tighter, until the point is erased. Apocalypse. End of the world.

