

SCREENDAILY

'Eclipse' review: Tender 1999-set debut explores an Austrian childhood in the shadow of AIDS

BY **WENDY IDE, SENIOR INTERNATIONAL CRITIC** | 5 SEPTEMBER 2026

Secrecy and stigma threaten a childhood friendship in Manuel Wetscher's Venice Horizons premiere



**SOURCE: VENICE FILM FESTIVAL
'EKLIPSE'**

Dir. Manuel Wetscher. Austria/Italy. 2026. 91 mins.

A ...ulating layer of silence is intended to protect Tomy from the truth about his father's illness. And while, it does. Tomy and his best friend Chris spend an idyllic summer at a dairy farm high in

Austria's Tyrolean Alps, working with Tomy's gruff uncle and playing in the joyously feral way of pre-teen boys without much in the way of supervision. But secrecy can be cancerous. When a splinter of the truth about Tomy's father – that he is suffering from 'the gay disease' – reaches Chris, it drives a wedge between the two boys and sends ripples through the wider community. Intimate, acutely observed and painfully honest, the assured 1999-set feature debut from Manuel Wetscher explores ignorance, stigma and the abrupt end of childhood innocence.

This is keenly perceptive filmmaking across the board

It's a highly personal project for Wetscher, who lost his own father to AIDS-related complications in the early 1990s but only learned the truth years later. This autobiographical element to the story, together with the empathetic, child's-eye perspective and the rural setting, will draw immediate comparisons with the work of Carla Simón, in particular her first feature, 2017's *Summer of 1993*. But the fact that we have seen a similar story told before doesn't lessen the power of this one. *Eclipse*, which premieres in Venice Horizons before screening at TIFF, is a striking and empathetic picture which builds its account of the growing fractures in a community through seemingly tiny and insignificant details.

At the heart of the film is the friendship between Tomy and Chris, played, respectively, by impressive youngsters Moritz Hohlrieder and Finley Brown. Play between them is a serious business: dam-building is a feat of structural engineering, plugged with moss and constructed with intense, companionable concentration. War games, with sticks for rifles, repurpose the sun-dappled forest floor as a battleground. It's the kind of attuned, instinctive play that occurs between two kids who know each other almost as well as they know themselves. Which is why, when Chris suddenly grows inexplicably hostile, shutting down his side of the relationship, it's stingingly painful for Tomy.

What drives Chris from his friend is fear: a spiteful comment from a truck driver suggests that he might be at risk of catching Tomy's father's disease, with all the shame and stigma that accompany it. There's a hint, delicately understated, that Chris might be wrestling with questions about his own sexuality, something that carries additional freight for a child whose strict religious upbringing has identified AIDS as a 'punishment from God'. For his part, Tomy suspects that there's something he's not being told from the way his mother's eyes fill with tears as she watches Tomy, hair spiked with soap, and Chris miming to their favourite song; and from the too-bright way his mother talks about his father's recovery.



This is keenly perceptive filmmaking across the board. Cinematographer Simone Hart's lens captures the drama of the mountain landscape but also the drudgery of the dairy farm, with its manure-shovelling grind and endless toil. She tunes into the loaded glances between adults which don't quite pass over the heads of the children. Wetscher adds visual texture and emotional weight by incorporating VHS footage of his own family and his late father.

The use of sound is equally expressive: the soundscape mirrors Tomy's focus on the world around him. We hear the scratch of the ant colony that he studies; the rich layers of bird call in the forest; the clang of cowbells. Later, we catch whispers and snippets of conversations from which Tomy is deliberately excluded. Music, used economically and diegetically, is a powerful tool. A recording of the band in which Tomy's father played with his uncle provides a link to him when other lines of communication have been shut down. And throughout the film, the imminent 1999 total eclipse takes on a metaphorical resonance: something rare and significant that is met with an underlying frisson of fear.

Production companies: EUTOPIAFILM, Albolina Film

International sales: Films Boutique contact@filmsboutique.com

Producers: Bernhard Holzhammer, Victor Kössl

Screenplay: Bernhard Jarosch, Manuel Wetscher

Cinematography: Simone Hart

Production design: Esther Frommann

Editing: Anna Kirst

Music: Marco Schröder, Johannes Winkler

Main cast: Moritz Hohlrieder, Finley Brown, Hannes Perkmann, Lisa Schützenberger, Lenz Moretti, Barbara Romaner, Lisa-Lena Tritscher, Sebastian von Malfèr, Michael Pascher

