

The Trump Biopic Is an AIDS Movie

The Apprentice is arguably the best HIV-related film of 2024.

January 1, 2025 By Mathew Rodriguez

When the [Golden Globes](#) air on Sunday, January 5, both Jeremy Strong and Sebastian Stan will be up for awards for their roles in the film *The Apprentice*, the Donald Trump biopic that debuted to critical acclaim just prior to the presidential election. Stan, known for playing Bucky Barnes in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and Strong, known for playing Kendall Roy in the TV series *Succession*, play Trump and his mentor, notorious American lawyer Roy Cohn, respectively.

Despite critical praise, the [film underperformed](#) at the box office, probably in part because many people could not stomach paying to watch a film about Trump. But forgoing this film (understandable given the political climate) means missing out on a great piece of AIDS cinema, one that serves not only as a reminder of how AIDS shaped our current social and political climate but also as an antidote to the genre's usual formula.

The film begins in the 1970s, when Trump worked for his father and the Department of Justice was investigating allegations of racial discrimination at their rental properties. After a chance meeting with attorney Roy Cohn, Donald Trump gets Cohn to represent him, kick-starting a friendship between the two and a tutelage in heartless politics from Cohn to the eventual president.

It's established early in the film that Cohn is both gay and deeply homophobic (when Cohn meets Stan's Trump, he asks, "What are you, some kind of faggot?"), but in the first scene depicting Cohn's home life, we meet his live-in partner, whom he calls "sweetheart" in front of his colleagues. And when Trump attends his very first Cohn bash, we see him walk in on Cohn, face down on a bed, getting rammed from behind as a few other men have sex around him. At that same party, Cohn addresses the entire crowd, which includes his clients—Andy Warhol among them—and declares his love for America. He says that "America is my most important client" and that the people present are "the last line of defense between a free world and a totalitarian hellscape."

As Cohn repeatedly declared his love for America and expressed that he felt it was his job to save it, I began to think of David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives*, in which Wojnarowicz speaks again and again of "this killing machine called America." I thought of Cohn's pledge to the killing machine and his willingness to trample over everyone lower on the ladder than him and how, eventually, he too would die of an AIDS-related illness in 1986, even though he would publicly tell people that he had liver cancer and deny his queerness. There is, by the way, a [panel in Cohn's](#)

[name on the AIDS quilt](#); it memorializes him with three words: bully, coward and victim.

And Cohn's character in *The Apprentice* embodies each of these three words. He bullies those around him, fails to face up to his own queerness and illness and is ultimately not only a victim of the AIDS crisis but also of his best friend's cruelty. While most AIDS films focus on a person or a group triumphing over adversity—think *Philadelphia*, *120 BPM* or *Dallas Buyers Club*—Ali Abbasi's film is much more concerned with the weakness and fear of Trump to be even a friend to Cohn as he and his partner face certain death. After the opening of Trump Tower, Cohn asks Trump whether he would do him a favor and let his partner, Russell, stay there while he recovers from pneumonia. Though Trump is reluctant at first, he obliges. We later learn that Trump has kicked Russell out and given Cohn a full bill for the stay, despite saying he could live there gratis.

In that sense, *The Apprentice* upends the AIDS film formula. Rather than documenting the great force of sheer will that it takes to overcome the hallmarks of the early crisis—government neglect, societal stigma and failing personal health—this film focuses on how people of delusional self-importance fail to respond to those in need around them; here, Trump's frailty, lack of conscience and inability to love is on full display.

Tony Schwartz, who collaborated with Trump on his bestseller *The Art of the Deal*, and who is depicted in the film's final minutes, wrote in a [New York Times](#) essay that the film shows how a "lack of conscience can be a huge advantage when it comes to accruing power, attention and wealth. While "most other human beings abide by a social contract," Schwartz wrote, Trump does not.

What does *The Apprentice* have to say to us, as a second Trump presidency looms? In an election season that saw Trump's vice president [disseminate racist HIV misinformation](#) about Haitian immigrants, the film was primarily a reminder of how much the AIDS crisis continues to shape our political reality. When Trump is inaugurated on January 20, the United States will have as its president someone who deeply fears people with HIV, even if he did love someone with AIDS prior to abandoning him.

I don't know if the film has an answer on how to deal with someone who is so calcified, so traumatized by his own lack of a loving upbringing that he carries that trauma forth through an inability to love anyone else. But it could, perhaps, serve as fuel in our own quest to love one another.

I saw the film on a Thursday afternoon while, unbeknownst to me, my friend (and well-known AIDS activist and writer) Ted Kerr was seeing it, at the same time across town. In our texts back and forth, he described the final scenes to me as a sort of road trip buddy comedy. As the film closes, we see Trump wheeling Cohn around Mar-a-Lago, trying to impress him with all his wealth. But, of course, this is no *Thelma and Louise* or *Boys on the Side*. Most buddy comedies remind us of how friendship endures through anything life can throw at it. Just as *The Apprentice* subverts the usual formula of AIDS cinema, so, too, does it change up the idea of a buddy comedy; in this film, Trump shuns the one person mentored him, the one person who tried to look out for him, all because of Cohn's HIV status. He gifts Cohn a counterfeit set of Tiffany cuff links for his birthday and, the next day, has the entire room in which he sat steam-cleaned. When Cohn understands that Trump is abandoning him, he says, "Good to see you lost the last traces of decency you once had."

The film is now another star in the beautiful constellation of inside jokes and references that my friend Ted and I share. *The Apprentice* is a quirky movie; it's an AIDS film more preoccupied with top-down cruelty than bottom-up resilience as well as a buddy comedy more concerned with rupture than coming together. But that it lives as a touchpoint between me and a friend is maybe a gift and a lesson in the power of supportive friendships as well as how essential they will be as we all face being rejected, as an American people, by Trump and his fear-fueled ego over the next four years.

