East European Film Bulletin

REVIEW

What if You Pretended to Be Your Enemy?

Romas Zabarauskas' *The Activist* (*Aktyvistas*, 2026)

VOL. 168 (OCTOBER 2026) BY ANTONIS LAGARIAS

Ever since Judith Butler introduced the concept of "performativity" in *Gender Trouble*,[1] the idea that identities are not natural but constructed through everyday actions, gestures, and signs remains at the heart of LGBTQ+ politics. According to Butler, one does not have a fixed identity, be it gendered or sexual. Instead, identities are social constructs and constantly shaped through repetitive behavior. Butler's work on performativity has been taken up by people who try to change how they are perceived, temporarily – for subversive parody in drag shows – or permanently – by gradually modifying how one's identity is presented, in gender transition. Romas Zabarauskas' film *The Activist* explores the links between identity and performance through a different kind of role-playing, by imagining a gay man adopting the appearance, codes, and behaviors of far-right masculinity as a way to infiltrate a neo-Nazi group.

The story takes place in Kaunas, Lithuania's second-largest city. Deividas (Elvinas Juodkazis), the leader of the LGBTQ+ NGO Rainbow Kaunas, announces that a Pride march will be held there for the first time, only to be found dead, assaulted in his own home. With the police reluctant to investigate the murder, and possibly biased against the victim, Deividas' partner, Andrius (Robertas Petraitis), decides to take matters into his own hands. Convinced that the killer is a member of Kaunas' far-right underground, he poses as a newcomer far-right militant ready for local action in order to infiltrate their ranks and identify the killer.

Despite the grim opening, the film' premise sounds refreshing as far as queer politics is concerned. Political or spy thrillers thrive on the excitement of concealed identities, with audiences sitting on the edge of their seats when undercover agents have to use their skills and wit to resist being discovered and overcome difficult situations. An assumed identity may even gradually

consume the original one, with characters getting lost in role-playing, thinking they indeed are what they are pretending to be. All of which is to say that assuming a new identity can be a dangerous enterprise, and danger has always seduced audiences. By applying this well-known genre recipe to a queer backdrop, the film puts its conventions in service of a political agenda. Films on activism, social injustice, and minorities have long focused on staging social dramas, ignoring other cinematic genres. Occasionally, stylistic choices lead to didactic, moralistic, or victimizing scenes that fail to reach audiences who do not already share the films' views. Staging an activist thriller with queer characters within a larger political setting lets Zabarauskas exploit the genre's formal and narrative devices to surprise audiences and perhaps amplify the film's political reach.

This is why *The Activist* feels especially disappointing when straying away from this promising pathway. The first and arguably most interesting part of the film sets the stage for Andrius' decision. Deividas and Andrius represent two views of queer politics that seem hard to reconcile. Deividas stands for collective action, seeing the Pride march as a much-needed act of defiance against right-wing conservatism and a symbolic precedent for the future. On the other hand, Andrius sees activism as an obstacle to constructing a happy relationship as a gay couple, reminding Deividas that devotion to ideological struggles comes with a toll on one's personal life. This tension between the social and the personal collapses at the moment of Deividas' death. Andrius' investigation to uncover his lover's killer is both personal – a quest for justice, or revenge – and social, since, for his plan to succeed, he needs to literally wear the clothes and face of his political enemies, understand their mindset, and adopt their codes.

From that point on, however, the film rushes to its conclusion. To learn more conventionally masculine codes, Andrius turns to Jonas (Simas Kuliesius), a trans man and member of the Rainbow collective with whom he feels particularly close. The film draws a parallel here between gender transition and Andrius' own transformation. While this parallel is perhaps exaggerated, it is meant to emphasize how gender transition involves changing both one's social and physical appearance. Andrius thus sees Jonas as a specialist in masculinity, a unique ally in his mission. In fact, the film devotes a lengthy sequence to Jonas' experience of transition, shown to have been both liberating and painful, as, in the process of shaping a self that feels real to him, he had to lose his previous partner who could not accept this change. However, after establishing this interesting parallel, the film immediately forgets it: Andrius' body and behaviors are adjusted through a segment that fast-forwards the entire process. Over a couple of weeks, which are condensed into a training montage, he effortlessly adopts the body, appearance, and habits of a skinhead, without ever questioning what this transformation may entail for his sense of self.

His integration into the neo-Nazi group comes with similar ease. After going to a bar known for attracting far-right crowds, he is challenged to extinguish a

cigarette on the body of a man he just met to prove he can follow orders. Andrius does not hesitate, and this single action suffices to impress the group's leader, who welcomes him with open arms. At no point does Andrius' devotion appear to be called into question. Again, any moments that could point to Andrius struggling with his new role are quickly swept away. In fact, Andrius does not seem to have any second thoughts about committing violence. Extinguishing the cigarette or punching a coworker, which basically amount to bullying and torture, appear to be treated as fair play given the greater mission of discovering the one responsible for Deividas' death. The film never expands on the morality of these acts.

Up to this point, *The Activist* mainly suffers from underdeveloping the many themes it introduces. Andrius' performance of a neo-Nazi comes all too easily, and there is no reflection on how Andrius feels about his transformation or how a calculated disguise may blur the boundary between role and self through sustained performance. Similarly, *The Activist* misses the opportunity to use genre conventions to deliver what could be one of the first "queer political thrillers." Yet it is the film's solution to the whodunit plotline that significantly undermines its political ambitions.

As Andrius dives deeper into the far-right group, it becomes clear that its members cannot be the ones responsible for Deividas' death. The group consists of a few stereotypical angry men that drink, hate what is different, and believe in conspiracies. At no point do they seem to represent a real threat to Andrius. In fact, the group's activities amount to Sunday afternoon drinking gatherings, lacking any substantial political structure. If anything, they seem jealous of Rainbow's efficient activism, finding them organized "like the Mafia" while they themselves are seen as "hooligans," inverting what one may expect. Ultimately, Andrius finds out that the one responsible for Deividas' death is not part of the neo-Nazi group. In fact, his death was not a politically motivated murder at all. Once the truth is out, in the final part the film switches to NGO politics, governmental scandals, and corrupted 'bad apples' among officials. The neo-Nazi group is quickly forgotten as Andrius symbolically ends his undercover mission by agreeing to march side-by-side with his friends from the Rainbow collective.

Beyond the film's universe, this ending feels reassuring. Perhaps, if neo-Nazi groups are little more than angry men drinking away on their Sunday afternoons, then they are less of a threat than one might have feared. If this were meant to be a subversive twist, it actually feels more like a return to yet another stereotype. Corrupt officials and money-laundering NGOs step in as the 'real' danger, an all too familiar story where the enemy turns out to be within one's own ranks, and personal profit matters more than ideological struggle. The issue is that this ending seems to belong to a different story altogether. *The Activist* begins by asking how far you are willing to go in a quest for personal and social justice, and what happens when you perform as your

enemy for long enough to be mistaken for one. The film never answers either question. Andrius crosses into far-right masculinity and back out again unscarred, only needing to find his new place within the queer movement upon his return. Pretending to be your enemy, it turns out, changes nothing, which may be the most comfortable answer the film could have given.

1. Butler, J. (1990). Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. Routledge. ↩