



REVIEW



PHOTO: Courtesy of the gallery

Still from *Rhinoplasty*

Rhinoplasty at Vox's Fourth Wall

By J. MAKARY

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Rhinoplasty, Yoshua Okón's amped-up character study of wealthy Mexican teenagers, inverts the traditional coming-of-age story: in this journey of self-discovery, the ego is vindicated, not surrendered, in the process of finding one's place in society. Using non-professional actors to play versions of themselves, the video claims to be based on a true story, one in which three boys in Polo shirts and sunglasses cruise around town provoking people on the basis of sex, class, and ethnicity from the safety of their car. But soon, any sense of reality gives way to hyperbole and parody, and what seemed to be a testosterone-heavy romp becomes, under Okón's direction, an indictment of power and an excoriating examination of cruelty and its reasons.

The story's motor is Cha, a preppy teen sitting behind the wheel of a squeaky-clean Volkswagen. Sliding a cd into the car's player, he takes off on a day-in-the-life journey, snorting cocaine, sipping Modelo, and picking up his friends for an afternoon of drive-by harassment. Their targets are working-class Mexicans: maids, construction workers, gas station attendants. Words, sometimes accompanied by sexual aggression and violence, hit their marks. As the actors improvise their insults, they touch on potent forms of prejudice: "Yell something at that fucking peasant." "Fucking Jews, I've had it. I wonder what their anuses smell like." "I'll bet you my green Armani that we'll see a fag very soon." Okón pushes his actors to forge an ugly portrait of wealth based on blind hate delivered in an offhand, comical way. They taunt each other, too, about sexual inability and vanity in a jocular but hostile fashion. Their interactions have a feeling of instability and lack of trust, even in friendship.

Okón's camera shoots mostly from inside the car: angled from the backseat, it shows the well-manicured, tree-lined streets and gleaming buildings of Mexico City; positioned on the dashboard, it shows the nasty glee on the boys' faces, gold necklaces under their collars and dabs of cocaine on their noses.

Other shots, from Cha's point of view, show him homing in on his targets. The framing of the windshield and the car seats pulls the viewer into this tight, protected space. But instead of retaining its power as a status symbol, Okón casts the car as an artificially constructed space of power. Cha and his friends commit most of their offenses from within the car and speed away afterwards, never risking a physical confrontation that would strip them of their belief in their own dominance.

The harassment scenes are jarring not only because of their charged content, but also because they confuse viewers' sense of what is real. The actors respond off the cuff to whatever they see, resulting in language choices that are at once brutal, original, and sometimes even funny, and their victims retaliate so naturally that their reactions feel immediate and real. When the boys yell at a group of construction workers, a camera documents the action from inside the car. Then, for just a brief moment, the workers are seen in close-up, their faces constricted as they chase after the car. This simple cinematic gesture—a second camera and an edit inside the action—dismantles the rules of *Rhinoplasty*. Up until now, cinematic artifice was part of the world inside the car, but the outside world was filmed with a documentary quality. A critical shift occurs as it becomes clear that the boys' targets are also acting their parts. The sudden revelation of their agency as participants suggests that Cha and his friends are subjects being critiqued not only by viewers but also by the people—the underclass, women, minorities—who are the boys' favored objects of discrimination and disgust. Okón deftly initiates this shift, using the boys' mocking tendencies to strip the wealthy of their power.

When Cha's power is challenged—first by his father, who disciplines him when he comes home late for lunch, and later when a bouncer at a bar refuses Cha and his date VIP status—he responds each time with a petulant, coke-fueled tantrum and a retreat to the private space of his car. Cha returns home, seething from a public humiliation, and attempts to rape his maid; it is only his own impotence that stops him. Back in the car, he tunes his radio to a spiritual program quoting from *Desiderata*, a devotional poem whose Latin title means “desired things.” Tears of anger streaming down his face, Cha listens as a soothing male voice intones:

*Go placidly amid the noise and haste,
and remember what peace there may be in silence.*

...

*As far as possible without surrender
be on good terms with all persons.
Speak your truth quietly and clearly;
and listen to others,
even the dull and the ignorant;
they too have their story.
Avoid loud and aggressive persons,
they are vexations to the spirit.*

In a close-up, Cha's tears of anger turn to joy, as his smiling face is superimposed over images of the cosmos.

*You have a right to exist.
You are a part of the universe,
Just like the trees and the stars.*

Despite Cha's look of spiritual ecstasy—in an image calling to mind Dreyer's *Joan of Arc*, chin upturned, tears streaming—*Rhinoplasty*'s ending is not conclusively redemptive. Earlier, on their joyride, Cha and his

friends proclaim that it is fate that they were born rich. Disaffected and bored, Okón's characters move from car to gated house to pristine shopping mall. The isolation of privilege turns them into antagonists whose authority, pushed through a filter, is reduced to pathetic scraps of power. They cling to what they have with an intense belief in their destiny to control the less powerful. Is it possible that Cha will change his ways? As the video loop returns to the beginning scene, we see him, in a leather biker jacket, putting a live chick into a microwave. As Cha's laughing face is reflected in the microwave door, it seems equally likely that he will find justification, not rehabilitation, for his life and his beliefs in *Desiderata*: there is a place in this world for everyone, even assholes.

Rhinoplasty by Yoshua Okón

Forth Wall at Vox Populi

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