

Mashhood Ahmed Sheikh's *Side Effects: Portrait of a Young Artist in Lahore*

Reviewed by Tatiana Zelenetskaya Young

The movie "*Side Effects: Portrait of a Young Artist in Lahore*" was directed by Mashhood Ahmed Sheikh, a visual anthropologist and documentary film maker. Mashhood has been educated as an applied social researcher. This film was made as the final project for the MPhil Visual Cultural studies degree at the University of Tromsø, Norway, after several months of field work in Lahore, Pakistan. Mashhood has also directed and co-directed "Running Man" (2005), "Murder" (2005), "Aik Kahani" (2005), "Keep Talking" (2006), and an ethnographic documentary film, "Harley ... the bad people?" (2007).

"Side Effects: Portrait of a Young Artist in Lahore" is a straightforward movie which gives a clear and uncensored view of the struggle and joy of the Young Artist in his daily life. The story unfolds in the city of Lahore which is located in Northeast Pakistan along the banks of the Ravi River. Lahore is a fabled city which has been in existence for hundreds of years, astonishing us with its magnificence. This city is often called the Garden of Mughals, taking its name from the days of the Mughal Empire. The ancient architecture guards the secrets and glory of days long gone. The beauty and vastness of nature is also present in the city, manifesting itself in parks and gardens. Today, this busy metropolis is the second largest city of Pakistan and is an education, media and art capital as well as the home of the Young Artist.

The Young Artist is enrolled in the College of Art and Design, studying for a bachelor's degree in graphic design. Apart from that, he is studying a certificate course in the National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan. On the college building that The Young Artist attends, the name of this institution is written in the English language. One would be surprised to see English letters instead of Punjabi (the regional language), or Urdu (the national language). Why in the city of Lahore, the second largest city of Pakistan, are there so many banners on buildings and such written in English? Is this how a first-time visitor would envision it, are these the images that appear in one's head before watching "Lahore"? And suddenly it comes to mind that the city of Lahore was under British rule. There are days when The Young Artist comes to the college only to find out that there are no

classes; he gets very frustrated or perhaps even discouraged. He wants to learn. When he gets together with his friends they complain that they want to learn the newest innovations, not to be taught outdated material. They all speak English, and write and study their homework in English. English has become increasingly more popular, especially among the youth. It is the language of young, educated, elite, and business oriented people; these changes are linked to the official status of government of Pakistan.

What comes to my mind is my birthplace which I left seventeen years ago: Kiev, the capital of Ukraine – how much I was surprised that names of banks, stores and other places are now written in English. Don't we have our own language?! Even such English words as "shopping" have sneaked into everyday conversation, even though we have plenty of Ukrainian words to describe this activity.

While attending the college, the Young Artist works every day. He already has been working for quite a while, and has a sufficient amount of experience and dreams of working for himself. His job takes much of his time; sometimes he works from 9 am to 4 am. He works for the magazine publishing company named "More". What does "More" symbolize? Is it the key word of this film? The Young Artist wants more: more from his life, more from his education, more from love - he wants more for himself.

This movie shows the real city of Lahore, real people and real life. What makes The Young Artist in Lahore so unique? It is neither Lahore nor The Young Artist but that You and I could be The Young Artist in our home city as well. All of us – humanity - basically want more from life and ourselves. I believe that many of us can recognize ourselves in a portrait that the director draws of The Young Artist. If it is not one aspect of life to which we can relate, then it could be another, similar to our own experience. There is something familiar in The Young Artist. How many of us want more from our jobs? We work hard, spending much of our fast, fleeting years doing that which we chose to do; we sleep less, eating while walking to the bus or a car, having virtually no time for our hobbies or friends. How many of us can recognize ourselves in the sense of lost love? I think we all felt it somewhere in our lives. Yes, we all can say the identical words "It was only me who was serious", and of course our hearts ache, feeling as if there is no word that will describe our pain, and we became as wordless as The Young Artist. I am also sure that we can speak to the fact that sometimes we did not learn as much as we had anticipated.

Did the director meet the goal to show what everyday life can be? Did we recognize ourselves in The Young Artist? Did he succeed in illustrating contemporary Lahore to us? Did we really picture in our mind that residents of Lahore buy jeans, do homework in English and read advertisements of store banners

adorned in English? How many times have we watched movies in which there is no reality, where reality is nothing but sugar coating and facade?

Because the perception of beauty soothes the human heart, the Young Artist is surrounded by his friends who want to capture the moments of life in “stills”. They go to nature to spontaneously photograph whatever they find interesting. They do macro-photography. Did you know that sand, dust and sticks carry so much beauty in them? You should see for yourself – watch the film! The team wants to immortalize these moments via capturing flashes of simple, everyday activities - such as playing with friends or being with loved ones. The Young Artist wants to avoid the human tendency to drift into life’s monotony by illuminating the experience of these moments.

During one of their trips to the lake, for example, the Young Artist and his friends meet Ahmed Raza. Ahmed’s simple words of wisdom speak for themselves, illustrating how one experiences and understands the world, from distinctive meanings and values as individual human-beings. Ahmed proclaims “How do you save the one who’s drowning willingly?” He then continues, “Stop listening to the sound of your own voice. Stop being obsessed by your own desires. Learn from books if you want to know something”. Ahmed weaves his message: “How may I conceive of our physical world if I don’t know where time begins and ends”.

The Young Artist experienced joy and enthusiasm for life when he dined on “chicken’s butts” with his friends or went “flying” and radiated happiness when he spent time with his girlfriend. Sometimes the Young Artist gets frustrated with his life, his job and his lost love; he declares that he “went quiet”. This is the side effect of love! Soft yellow lights surrounding the city of Lahore in the evening, the music eerily loops in the air around the Young Artist while he drives his motorcycle. He sings “I have a thousand stories. How can I tell you them all...?”