

**Zurkhaneh: The House of Strength: Music and Martial Arts of Iran.** Produced by the University of Alberta and Lab 80 film. Directed by Federico Spinetti. DVD. 105 minutes. 2014.

This film explores the world of Zurkhaneh, an ancient Iranian gymnasium that is conceptualized by its practitioners as a complex tradition merging martial arts, music, and spiritual practice. Building upon three years of ethnographic research, this documentary covers a wide range of locations, including the Iranian diaspora in Canada, various urban locations in Iran, and the first Zurkhaneh Olympic competition in South Korea in 2008. More specifically, the film deals with the profound human experiences lived by Zurkhaneh musicians and athletes, showing how music, religion, pride, ethics and athletic performance overlap and are expressed in this tradition through bodily exertion and specialized practices.

However, after one watches *Zurkhaneh: The House of Strength*, a fundamental question arises that forces the viewer to rethink the content of this work. What is the film about? Furthermore, what is, in the end, the Zurkhaneh? Is it a sport, an institutionalized religion, a dance form, or a type of civil alliance? Alternatively, is it a place, a musical tradition, perhaps a folk healing system? Ethnomusicologist Federico Spinetti, director of the film, manages to weave these diverse threads of thoughts and themes throughout, forcing viewers to pay close attention to every detail presented in the story.

Beginning with a primordial scene that depicts a pair of human hands holding a hunk of wet clay intent to build a drum, the film progresses slowly, in a meditative manner, trying to connect the lives, customs, and material conditions of Iranian musicians and athletes. This same meditative articulation of the ethnographic content turns the film into a markedly descriptive one at times, leading to a lethargic visual flow that might disrupt some viewers' experiences. Nonetheless, the slow rhythm of the film seems to be a conscious choice that informs Spinetti's genuine thick description of the subject matter.

Along these lines, the documentary focuses on the intersections of ancient music-making traditions, carried out by a cast of poets, singers, and drummers called *morsheds*, as well as the ethics, beliefs, and practices maintained by Zurkhaneh athletes. These intersections and themes are divided into chapters that center on sub-disciplines or elements within the sport. For instance, some of the chapters' titles are "stretching," "clubs," "Sufism," and "bow," or are named after the cities where Spinetti carried out his fieldwork, such as Busan, Toronto, and Tehran.

The chapters establish key themes that do not necessarily relate to their specific area-titles. In that way, one rapidly discovers that the director is perhaps more interested in crafting a comprehensive portrait of the sport, rather than in dissecting it into elements and structures. For instance, the opening chapter,

devoted to the Toronto Zurkaneh scene, seems at first to be an introduction to a case of transnational cultural developments. The director gets in contact with a group of Iranian émigrés who wish to modernize the Zurkaneh so that it might appeal to local youth. The modern version they propose mixes fitness aerobics with traditional sub-disciplines such as stretching or push-ups, and is imbued with vague symbolisms taken from the Iranian sport. From that point on, the story takes the viewer on a journey of gradual discoveries and subtle elucidations. The sub-disciplines and symbolisms used by the Iranian émigrés to introduce the Zurkaneh are progressively unpacked later when Spinetti takes his fieldwork to Iran, where shots and sequences introduce the viewer to the dynamism of modern urban Tehran, as well as to the interior of the Zurkaneh's vaulted structures and sacred pits where athletes perform. Inside these buildings, populated by fit Iranian men of all ages, the ancient war drum seen made at the outset of the film is finally shown as the nexus between belief, sound, and bodily praxis. The drum is used to produce cyclical rhythms that accompany the participants' circular exercises and routines. These exercises are classified within various sub-disciplines, including club swinging, whirling, bowing, lifting, and wrestling. In all instances, practitioners argue, the exercises channel a physical and spiritual upward movement. Athletes who perform these movements while observing certain ethical mandates—namely, “love of a challenge, respect of others, and unity of body and soul”—achieve catharsis and purification. Zurkaneh drums are “epic and devotional” in this regard. Morsheds affirm that the rhythmic patterns they play were once performed during actual battles and were used to instill strength to the warriors. Additionally, drummers also sing. Their vocal idioms have been influenced by Sufi poetry, with themes of unconditional love and longing, and by formal Iranian radif music, especially through the use of the *hodayun* melodic mode. Thus, cyclical rhythms, devotional poetry, embodied ethics, and coordinated physical drills are integrated into a totality of symbolic movement and music.

The vaulted buildings where athletes interact help to reverberate the morshed's playing and singing. It is within this rarified aural environment that, as practitioners affirm, spiritual transformation occurs through sound and physical exertion. Furthermore, bodily drills also promote forms of somatic synchronization. This connection between bodies and beings speaks about the political history of the sport. According to interviewees, the sport constituted in the past a “hidden life” beneath the state, a type of civil police that regulated social life before the Iranian revolution codified and regulated Zurkaneh practices. During that time, Zurkaneh followers comprised independent political alliances based on the brotherhood gained during shared experiences of strain and transcendence. However, as the film shows, this independence is virtually lost today. Athletes and morsheds struggle on a daily basis to keep up with their

practices while the state support is nearly nonexistent. Currently, the brotherhood of Zurkhaneh followers is in many respects a form of resistance. Practitioners defend their beliefs and traditions against changing political and cultural realities. This is shown, for instance, in the confrontation between Iran's new National Zurkhaneh Federation and the many grassroots organizations that fight to maintain the sport outside the scope of the state's unilateral regulations.

Rather than asserting conclusions, the film shows evidence—it is up to the viewer to formulate explanations building upon what is seen. In this regard, the documentary would be beneficial for anyone interested in the study of fieldwork techniques and visual anthropology. It also would be a good fit in classes dealing with cultural studies, transnational and diaspora studies, medical anthropology, and embodiment theory. Moreover, in a contemporary global environment where the visual mass media usually projects negative perceptions about Iranian citizens and culture, this film shows the everyday life of real Iranians and a thriving culture based upon values of peaceful cohabitation, wisdom, health, tolerance, and spiritual growth.

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