

***Zurkhaneh—The House of Strength: Music and Martial Arts of Iran.*** 2010/2014. Directed by Federico Spinetti. In Persian and English with English, Italian, and Persian subtitles. 105 minutes. Colour, DVD. Produced by the University of Alberta in collaboration with Lab 80 film. Presented by folkwaysAlive! University of Alberta in partnership with Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. Available online for rent or purchase (<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/zurkhaneh>).

*Zurkhaneh—The House of Strength* is the first full-length documentary of Federico Spinetti (professor at University of Cologne), an experienced researcher of the music of Central Asia (in particular Tajikistan), about which he has made several short ethnographic films. The *zurkhaneh* is a traditional Iranian gymnasium: a venue where historical “heroic sports” (*varzesh-e pahlevani*) are practised with live accompaniment consisting of drum and sung poetry with spiritual, moral, and epic subject matter. This film features multiple manifestations of the *zurkhaneh* in three geographically and culturally divergent spaces: the indigenous context of several Iranian cities; the established diasporic context of the Iranians in Toronto, Canada; and the momentary, detached setting of the world championship for traditional sports and games in Busan, South Korea.

The multi-sited and multi-faceted unfolding of the film, involving a juxtaposition of voices, stories, players, images, clips, and soundscapes, gradually reveals different aspects of the semantic field of *zurkhaneh*. What does *zurkhaneh* stand for? Is it a building, a space, a cultural tradition, a sports discipline, a ritual performance? The 1971 French documentary *Le zourkhane et l'épopée iranienne* characterizes *zurkhaneh* sessions as “neither spectacle, nor ceremony” (Lubtchansky 1971). Like its forty-five-year-old predecessor, Spinetti’s film offers partial answers, makes brief excursions into related cultural phenomena, and invites the spectator to actively engage in constructing his/her own apprehension of the phenomenon. This endeavour is somewhat complicated by the film’s focus on contemporary manifestations and interpretations. Spinetti does not seek to shed light on historical forms and evolutions of the *zurkhaneh*, nor to clarify its changing social roles and perceptions. For that matter, the origins and historical details of the *zurkhaneh* are the subject of speculation and debate (Rochard 2002).

The modern institution of the Iranian gymnasium aspires to realize the moral and physical education of athletes (*pahlevans*) embodying the ancient idea of *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body). The film briefly touches upon the time- and place-related changeability (and even absence) of the *zurkhaneh*’s moral code. The specific intricacies of the far-reaching codification and symbolism, ruling and shaping the *zurkhaneh* and its dwellers’ behaviour, and varying in parallel motion with societal changes, are too complex to be completely unravelled in this documentary. A major shift, however, is elaborated in the film: the “new” codification prompted by the state-supported internationalization of Iranian martial arts as a sport or “game” with universal appeal. Smaller shifts in codification present themselves in the *zurkhanehs* of the diaspora.

The film, justifiably, seeks to explore interrelations with other Iranian cultural expressions. The featured example, a Kurdish Qadiri ceremony, belongs to a rather remotely related cultural phenomenon. Nevertheless, many parallels can be identified between *pahlevani* and Sufi traditions: dynamic hierarchic organization, strong codification of

practices, moral and spiritual goals, and the musical aspect of voice combined with percussion. Other possible cultural links that could have been explored include: correspondences of certain *zurkhaneh* movements with religious or ethnic–regional dance forms (e.g. *sama*, Kurdish folk dances) (Golzari 2015); and similarities of singing styles and poetic content with secular and religious traditions such as *shahnameh khani* (recitation of Ferdowsi’s Book of Kings), *noheh khani* (religious lamentations), *pardeh khani* (musical storytelling), and *tazieh* (religious passion play).

Many relevant details are highlighted in the course of the film: the architectural shape and function of the *zurkhaneh* building; the prevailing system of hierarchy, position, and permission; the role and identity of the singer-percussionist and director (*morshed*); the symbolic meaning, performance fashion, and sequence of the different exercises; the genres, types, and positioning of poetry and prayers; and aspects of the music. Fascinating recent developments, such as changes in musical repertoire and style under the influence of popular music, and the division of work between two musicians replacing one *morshed*, are not questioned. One could argue that *zurkhaneh*’s musical aspects did not receive the anticipated attention, despite the documentary having been made by an ethnomusicologist, and having engaged two Iranian musicologists (Sasan Fatemi and Hamid-Reza Ardalan). While idiomatic *zurkhaneh* music is continuously present in the film, it chiefly manifests itself on a non-analytical level.

The fruit of three years of ethnographic research, *Zurkhaneh—The House of Strength* is a fresh update and complement to the older serious documentaries (Brabant 1963; Lubtchansky 1971), and a welcome addition to the recent explosion of mostly amateur, informative or promotional videos available on YouTube and other channels. In addition to richness in informative content, the documentary charmingly captures the cultural atmosphere and human interaction of contemporary Iran and its diaspora, faithfully represents a selection of discourses prevailing in various socio-cultural substrata of Iranian society (note the ladies’ reaction in the final scene), and ingeniously evokes the complex and dynamic negotiation of grassroots concerns of cultural identity vis-à-vis official political–religious agendas.

#### References cited

Brabant, Charles

1963 “Les Zourhânes.” *Les coulisses de l’exploit*. Produced by Pathé cinéma, Radiodiffusion Television Francaise. Film. <http://www.ina.fr/video/CPF04007202> (accessed 26 April 2016).

Golzari, [Mohammad]

2015 *History of the Zurkhaneh and the Story of Hossein e Golzar Kermanshahi*. Film. <https://youtube/0WiULycBcE> (added by Bisotun, 2 August 2015; accessed 26 April 2016).

Lubtchansky, Jean-Claude

1971 “Le zourkhane et l’épopée iranienne.” *Banc d’essai*. Produced by Jean Claude Lubtchansky, commentary by Sylvain Corthay. Film. <http://www.ina.fr/video/CPF86642923> (accessed 26 April 2016).

Rochard, Philippe

2002 “The Identities of the Iranian Zūrkhānah.” *Iranian Studies* 35/4: 313–40.

LISELOTTE SELS