

# **LAAT**

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## Abstract

*LAAT* is a short hybrid documentary that offers a glimpse into the world of Tehran's elderly *lutis* and the emotions they confront in the twilight of their lives as they reflect on their past. The film explores their role in the Iranian 1953 coup, a perspective that is often overlooked, seen through the eyes of a former child labourer who witnessed the events firsthand. Through interviews with participants and eyewitnesses, as well as archival footage, it explores how a gang of *luti* figures helped ignite the chaos that led to the fall of Mohammad Mossadegh's government, a pivotal moment in the country's political history that not only disrupted the elite but also shattered the hopes and dreams of the working class, leaving a deep wound on the soul of modern Iran, one that has yet to heal.

This film, grounded in research on different aspects of *luti* culture and history, as well as its portrayal in post-coup Iranian cinema, seeks to offer an authentic representation of the *luti* character, a rebel figure whose presence in both politics and cinema has been marked with controversy and debate.

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# 1 Introduction

The term *laat* (Persian: لات) originally referred to a nude destitute individual, but in contemporary usage, it primarily denotes to a person known for violent, delinquent, disruptive, and morally inappropriate behaviour; someone often regarded by Iranian society as *angal-e ejtemā* (social parasite). Although the exact point at which this term entered colloquial Persian is unclear, linguistic and historical evidence suggests that *laat* began to circulate among general public at least by the latter half of the nineteenth century and gradually became a prominent term within Iran's social discourse. Many people, including some elite, have approached this social entity with an attitude of arrogance and disregard. Nevertheless, *laat*, formerly known as *lūti*, has played an active and influential role in many socio-political events in modern Iran. Despite its historical significance, there is a scarcity of written accounts about members of this social entity, and their oral histories have often been without anyone taking the initiative to document their lives. As a result, the death of each *luti* has often meant the burial of unique fragments of Iran's socio-political history.

The *luti* character has long held a prominent place in Iranian cinema. Its peak in public popularity came during the 1960s, when films such as *Avval heykal* (*The Strong Man*, 1960), *Kolāh makhmali* (*Velvet Hat Wearer*, 1962), and *Qaisar* (1969) were major box office successes. Their popularity encouraged other producers to create films based on *luti* narratives, leading to a period in which a significant number of fiction films featured this character type, a trend that continued until the 1979 Revolution. At the time, such characters were commonly referred to by folkloric titles such as *dāsh mashti* (slick brother), *kolāh makhmali* (velvet hat wearer), and most notably *jāhel* (ignorant), and they came to occupy a special place in the popular culture of Iranian film audiences. Many of these films, categorized within the *jaheli* subgenre of 'tough-guy' movies, contributed to a caricatured cliché of *luti*; an exaggerated, highly theatrical portrayal that remains deeply embedded in the public imagination. This perspective on the character of *luti* was carried over into post-revolutionary Iranian cinema and continues to influence it to this day, particularly in period films and narratives about the second Pahlavi era (1941-1979). The primary motivation behind producing this film was to challenge prevailing misrepresentations by offering an authentic portrayal

grounded in historical research, framed around the role of *lutis* in the 1953 coup—a turning point in modern Iranian history—based on the testimonies of those who either directly participated in or closely witnessed the events.

## 2 Themes

### 2.1 Tehran, a duality

*”Tehran is a large village among the villages of Rey. It has many gardens and orchards, and an abundance of fruit trees. The inhabitants live in underground homes, like ant nests...and when an enemy approaches them, they hide in their underground dwellings, and the enemy lays siege for a few days and then departs. Then, the people emerge from the ground and engage in corruption, killing, and banditry. The inhabitants are often disobedient to the ruling monarch, and the only way to manage them is through tolerance. Tehran has twelve quarters, each in constant conflict with the others. They cultivate the land using hoes, and avoid keeping livestock out of fear that it may be confiscated.”*

Zakariya ibn Muhammad Qazwini, ca. 1270 CE.<sup>1</sup>

In 1786, coinciding with the rise of the Qajar dynasty, Tehran was officially designated as the capital of Iran. At the time, it was still a village located to the north of the ancient city of Rey. Following its elevation to capital status, Tehran gradually transformed into an urban centre, marked by the development of streets, mosques, a bazaar, a palace, a walled citadel, and twelve gates that protected the city from all directions. By the late Qajar period, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Tehran had begun to display the characteristics of a modernizing city. This transformation accelerated significantly under the succeeding Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979), during which rapid urban development reshaped the city’s infrastructure, architecture, and spatial organization.

Older generations who recall Tehran in the early years following World War II describe a city marked by abundant springs and gardens in its quiet northern parts, while the southern districts were known for their vibrant dynamic life. By then, nearly all the gates had been demolished, as the threat of attacks by gangs of thieves and bandits had completely faded. A sense of simplicity

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<sup>1</sup>Zakariya ibn Muhammad Qazwini, *Āthār al-bilād wa-akhbār al-‘ibād [Monuments of the Lands and Reports on the Peoples]* (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1994), 402.

ruled over the space, as traditional lifestyles continued to dominate urban culture. There was no such thing as traffic, as there were not many vehicles. Camels and mules were still commonly used to transport goods into the city from nearby villages. However, the city entered a new phase of transformation after the 1953 coup, with changes that intensified throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Architectural structures from the Qajar and early Pahlavi eras were demolished and replaced by western design complexes. It seemed as though the municipality wanted to erase the city's past and discard its history. These changes continued after the 1979 Revolution, as the cultural policies of the new theocratic regime severely restricted the vibrant secular cultural life that had once flourished. More green spaces were destroyed as the city expanded into a large metropolis, where traffic congestion, air pollution, and noise became its defining characteristics. Tehran today looks very different from what it once was. Most of the old trees have been cut and the orchards have been replaced by shopping malls, high-rises, and highways. Old theatres, cabarets, liquor stores, and nightclubs have been converted into storage spaces or left in ruins, turning Tehran of the 1940s and early 1950s into a subject of deep nostalgia.

Tehran in those years, beyond its visual appeal, was a city of dual identities. On one hand, it was a capital in transition, where the elites and educated classes were seeking to redefine concepts such as faith, ethics, justice, democracy, independence, and freedom within a society still strongly caught between tradition and modernity. This surge of political and intellectual engagement turned Tehran into a battleground of competing ideologies, where political figures, parties, and factions were caught in heated debates, occasionally spilling into violence and physical confrontation. Although many confused freedom with disorder and disregard for the rights of others, the ideological diversity and vibrancy of thought that emerged during this period made Tehran in those years one of the most dynamic and compelling stages in modern history. However, Tehran also had a darker and more troubling face. In the city's southern neighbourhoods, such as *Shūsh*, *Anbār Gandom*, *Javādieh*, *Sābūn Pazkhūneh*, and *Meydān-e Ghār* large numbers of the population suffered from poverty, illiteracy, poor sanitation, and various forms of social distress. These areas were home to significant numbers of criminals and thugs who, driven by economic desperation, often awaited

unrest as an opportunity to selfishly exploit the chaos.

Contemporary Tehran is a city where social and economic disparities are clearly visible, manifested through distinct districts that reflect class divisions. The poor mostly live in the southern quarters, while the political and economic oligarchy reside in the north, fearful of losing their power, assets, and privilege to the dissatisfied residents of the south amid ongoing social unrest. Despite the sweeping transformations that Tehran has undergone on the surface over the ages, the soul of the city has remained restless and chaotic. Its residents continue to rise in defiance of authority, leaving the government with no choice but to endure their disobedience. Thus, beneath its modern and controlled facade, Tehran remains a bed of smoldering ashes, ready at any moment to ignite into the flames of rebellion against the ruling class.

## 2.2 Lūti-gari, a fragile idealism

*”The name luti was given to people in a variety of occupations in urban centers for many centuries in Iran. It could indicate their cultural values, their economic standing, usually among the poorer social groups, and their political role. In a word, luti could be the socially conscious leaders of the poor, whose heroic values inspired them, and they could be every sort of thug, rogue and thief.”*

Vanessa Martin<sup>2</sup>

The origins of the *laat* subculture can be traced back to medieval periods, when its members were more commonly known as *luti*. In contemporary Persian, the word *luti* has largely fallen out of use in everyday speech and has been replaced by the expression *laat o lout*, which now generally carries a negative connotation, often evoking images of delinquent and disorderly individuals. However, from the perspective of those who identify with this subculture, *laat* and *lout* are distinct terms with opposing meanings. In their view, a *laat* is someone who is honourable and people-oriented, while a *lout* refers to a rascal and socially disruptive person. Despite this

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<sup>2</sup>Vanessa Martin, 'The Lutis, the Turbulent Urban Poor,' in *The Qajar Pact: Bargaining, Protest and the State in Nineteenth-Century Persia* (London: Tauris, 2005), 113.

internal distinction within the subculture, the dominant public perception of the term *laat* remains predominantly negative and does not consider the difference between the two terms. However, in the collective memory of many contemporary Iranians, *luti* refers to a member of a body of strong, tough men who once lived and functioned by specific honour codes in pre-modern Iran, a term that is now mainly encountered only in historical and literary contexts.

The term *luti* was first mentioned by the tenth-century poet, Kasai, who associated it with a catamite. Similarly, Rumi and Obeyd Zakani also referred to *lutis* as pederasts, individuals engaged in *lavāt* (sodomy), linking the term to the story of Lut (Lot) and his homosexual people in the Qur'an.<sup>3</sup> Some have described *lutis* as debauchees and gluttons who earned a living as entertainers of statesmen and the public. Some participated in activities such as magic tricks and puppet shows at weddings and social gatherings. Others would roam the streets with a *tonbak* (small drum), performing acts such as making monkeys dance or staging shows with goats, bears, and lions to amuse and delight the crowds.<sup>4</sup>

However, there was another group of *lutis* who had dedicated themselves to spiritual pursuits. This particular type of *luti*, which has been the main subject of my research during the making of this film, played a significant role in society over the centuries and has become a controversial figure in the country's sociopolitical discourse. He was a marginalized figure, not closely associated with conventional religious rituals, and was found more often in taverns than in mosques. While he did not conform to the formal expectations of religious piety, his actions adhered to the codes of *luti-gari* (luti-ness) and often embodied the virtues of *javānmardi* (chivalry), rooted in loyalty, trust, brotherhood, honour, courage, mercy, compassion, generosity, helping the poor and seeking justice for the weak. In this sense, this type of *luti* can be likened to the figure of *rend* in Persian mysticism, someone who rejects outward displays of religiosity but embodies the core ethical and humanistic values of the faith. Thus, within Iran's cultural landscape, this type of *luti* represented an alternative ideal of manhood that challenged conventional religious authorities, particularly those

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<sup>3</sup>Willem M. Floor, 'Luti' in *Encyclopedia Iranica*.

<sup>4</sup>Masoud Noghrehkar, *Zangi-hā-ye gud-e qodrat: Naghsh-e siyāsi va ejtemāei-ye jāhel-ha va lāt-ha dar tārikh-e mo'āser-e Irān* [*The Darkies of the Pit of Power: The Political and Social Role of Thugs and Ruffians in Modern Iranian History*] (Cologne: Nashr-e Forough, 2016), 24.

who lacked sincerity and integrity. While examining the dominant male composition of *lutis* in relation to histories of hegemonic masculinity is a valuable avenue for future research, this thesis instead focuses on the historical tradition associated with men, much of which has been overlooked or forgotten over time.

These individuals wore distinctive clothing carrying objects such as a knife made in Isfahan, a chain made in Yazd, a brass bowl from Kerman, and a silk handkerchief from Kashan.<sup>5</sup> Tattooing was highly prevalent among them, often featuring images of lions, dragons, or mythological human figures on their bodies. They emphasized masculinity, physically and spiritually trained in *zūrkhāneh* (house of strength) and gathered in *ghahvekhāneh* (coffeehouse) to listen to the recitations of *Shahnameh*, through which they emotionally connected with the legendary warriors of ancient Persia and its heroic traditions. Later, with the rise of Shi'ism in Iran in the early sixteenth century, they became heavily involved in cultural rituals such as *dasteh-gardāni* (religious processions), *rowzeh-khāni* (lamentations), and *taziye* (passion plays) during the holy months of Muharram, Safar and Ramadan. At the same time, however, they remained active in practices such as gambling, pigeon flying, cockfighting, ram fighting, athletic bouts, duels, and trials of endurance in eating,<sup>6</sup> which did not fully align with religious and social norms.

These *lutis* were urban Robin Hood-type bandits<sup>7</sup> who operated outside the laws of the state in their neighbourhoods, establishing and enforcing their own order according to the codes of chivalry. However, there were periods when groups of them were reduced to *chāghoo-keshān* (knife-wielders) and *arāzel o obāsh* (low life thugs), sustaining themselves through thievery, coercion, and extortion. At times, these actions were carried out on a larger, organized scale, often coinciding with episodes of sociopolitical unrest, most notably during the Isfahan rebellions, between 1824 and 1849.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Willem M. Floor, 'The Political Role of the Lutis in Iran,' in *Modern Iran: The Dialectics of Continuity and Change* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 87.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 87.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 83.

<sup>8</sup>Mohammad Reza Nassiri, *Lūtiyān va naqsh-e ānān dar āshubhā-ye Esfahān beyn-e sālhā-ye 1240 ta 1265 qamari (1824-1849 milādi)* [*The Lutis and their role in the unrest of Isfahan between 1240 and 1265 AH (1824-1849 AD)*] Pajūheshnāme-ye tārikh-hāye mahalli Irān [Research Journal of Iran Local Histories], 3(2) (1394 [2015]): 98.

The actions and behaviour of many *lutis* during troubled periods undermined the social status of *luti*, leading to mixed perceptions. Many came to view the *luti* as a pretentious figure who displayed superficial acts of chivalry while betraying the very codes they claimed to uphold. Even acts of sacrifice by prominent *luti* figures such as Sattar Khan and Bagher Khan, who bravely fought during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911), and Abbas Beg, who gave his life for the cause, were not enough to fully restore the collective respect that *luti* once commanded in Iranian society. The former two figures took up arms against the tyranny of the Qajar monarchy and in support of parliamentary democracy, which proved instrumental to the revolutionaries' victory. However, despite their critical role and recognition as national heroes, they are rarely referred to as *lutis*. In contrast, their antagonists, Sani Hazrat and Moghtader Nezam, who actively opposed the constitutional movement and led a monarchist rebellion in Tehran, are figures whose *luti* background is publicly acknowledged, often promoted as *laat* to emphasize their villainous character.

The fall of the Qajar dynasty and the rise of Reza Shah Pahlavi (reigned 1925-1941) ushered in a period of rapid modernization in Iran, marked by efforts to transform the urban landscape to resemble that of the West. By then, the fedora hat, which was later abandoned by most figures, and the switchblade had joined the handkerchief and prayer beads as part of the typical look of a *luti* on the street. At the same time, the authoritarian rule of the new monarch suppressed nearly all forms of political activism, including the sociopolitical activities of *lutis*. They had long been associated with rebellion, which was precisely the kind of threat the Pahlavi monarch aimed to eliminate. During Reza Shah's reign of law and order, *lutis* kept a low profile. However, many continued their unsavory activities such as theft, pimping, and the protection racket as means of survival,<sup>9</sup> while maintaining a relatively respected status within their own communities by keeping their operations outside their residential neighbourhoods.

Following the Allied invasion of Iran during World War II and the subsequent political upheaval, various factions emerged, shaped by competing ideologies, with the Communist movement assuming a particularly prominent role. This turbulent period marked not only a political revival

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<sup>9</sup>Floor, 'The Political Role of the Lutis in Iran,' in *Modern Iran: The Dialectics of Continuity and Change*, 92.

for Iranian elites but also a resurgence for *lutis*, whose prominent figures sought greater proximity to centres of power in the evolving political landscape and aimed to secure influential roles within unions. In addition, hundreds of *lutis* who controlled various neighbourhoods across Tehran had become increasingly involved in businesses that met people's daily needs, such as food, clothing, and transportation, as well as in illicit activities including smuggling, narcotrafficking, and the operation of opium dens. In the relative chaos and newly found freedoms of the era, various conservative political factions sought to exploit them for their own agendas. The *lutis* of this era developed a reputation as degenerate figures and became lumpenproletariat in the Marxist sense. They became dangerous classes, an unpredictable entity with no strong political commitments, capable of turning against the interests of the people and disrupting the course of history as determined by historical materialism.<sup>10</sup> This frustrated leftist factions, as the *luti* reemergence occurred at a critical moment when the socialist project in Iran was at its threshold.

Figures like Shaban Jafari, known as 'the Brainless' (*Shaban Bimokh*), Haj Abbasi brothers, better known as the 'Seven Bald Brothers' (*Haft Kachaloon*), Mustafa 'the Crazy' (*Mustafa Divooneh*), Asghar 'the Baker' (*Asghar-e Shater*), Hossein 'Iceman' (*Hossein-e Ramezoon Yakhi*), and Tayyeb Haj Rezaei were among the most prominent *luti* figures of the time. The latter was a leading figure with extensive connections to certain politicians and high-ranking military officers. In the years preceding the coup, he had become a successful middleman in Tehran's fruit and vegetable market and owned several trucks in the logistics business. Although it is widely believed by the general public that Shaban was the leader and principal organizer of the riots during the 1953 coup, this is not accurate. He was in prison and was only released at noon on the day of the coup. By then, the rebellion had already spread throughout the city, and the political tide had turned in favour of the coup plotters.<sup>11</sup> In fact, it was Tayyeb who, encouraged by Ayatollah Abol-Ghasem Kashani, contacted influential *luti* figures of various neighbourhoods and had them organized the night before the coup.<sup>12</sup> Ten truckloads of sticks were purchased and distributed to groups of men,

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<sup>10</sup>Olmo Golz, 'Dangerous Classes and the 1953 Coup in Iran: On the Decline of lutigari Masculinities,' in *Crime, Poverty and Survival in the Middle East and North Africa* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 183.

<sup>11</sup>Homa Sarshar, *Shaban Jafari* (Los Angeles: Naab, 2002), 159-163.

<sup>12</sup>Bijan Haj Rezaei interview with Omid Iran-Mehr in 2013.

many of whom had been brought in from neighbouring towns to join local gangs already armed with knives and machetes.<sup>13</sup> They were accompanied by prostitutes from *Shahr-e No*, Tehran's red-light district, and mobilized to rebel against the government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. For his efforts during the coup, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah, later awarded Tayyeb the honorific *rastākhiz* (resurgence) medal and bestowed upon him the title of *tājbakhsh* (kingmaker). This recognition tarnished his public image, as well as that of his associates, in the eyes of the supporters of the deposed Prime Minister, Mossadegh. Seen by the elites as hired muscle used to suppress democratic movements, *luti* came to embody a reactionary force aligned against political reform, serving to uphold the power of the conservative establishment.

Although the Shah expressed gratitude to *luti* figures for their role in repressing nationalist and leftist opposition in the years immediately following the coup, he gradually distanced himself from his traditional allies, including both the clergy and the *lutis*. After a public confrontation in 1960 between Tayyeb and General Nematollah Nasiri, the police chief of Iran, things began to deteriorate for the famous *luti*. The police began making life difficult for him. He first lost his monopoly over the banana trade and later fell into debt. In 1963, he was accused of organizing a riot on behalf of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and was subsequently sentenced to death, despite insufficient evidence to prove that he was the leader of the *luti* rebellion against the Shah. The execution of Tayyeb marked the beginning of the decline of the *luti* subculture in modern Iran. Once considered an unofficial enforcer of the regime's repression, this group gradually came under pressure from security organizations themselves. Several of its members were arrested and imprisoned. Also, in rapidly modernizing cities and with the expansion of the police force, their social influence and status were significantly undermined, and they were gradually disappearing from the neighbourhoods. Many withdrew completely from political activities and turned their focus to personal business ventures. Meanwhile, others grew closer to the religious clergy, an alignment that contributed to strengthening Iran's Islamic opposition.

In 1978-79, many of them sided with Ayatollah Khomeini, while another faction supported the

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<sup>13</sup>Ali Rahnama, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers, and Spooks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 160.

Shah's regime by attempting to sabotage the demonstrations. After the revolution, *lutis* underwent significant transformations to adapt to the new socio-political order. Some remained loyal to the previous regime and faded from the political scene, while others co-operated with the religious leadership of the revolution, actively participating in the suppression of secular factions. In recent decades, *lutis*, although no longer referred to by that term and now exclusively called *laats*, have remained politically relevant. They have occasionally been used by the state to suppress dissent, even as they face prosecution for criminal and illicit activities. The most notable instance in recent years occurred during the 2009 Green Movement, when 5000 of them were allegedly mobilized by authorities within the Islamic Republic to suppress street protests.<sup>14</sup> All these episodes highlight the lasting importance of *luti* as a key but controversial actor in Iran's complex political landscape.

### 2.3 The coup, a bitter memory

*Shah: I owe my throne to God, my people, my army — and you!*

Kermit Roosevelt Jr<sup>15</sup>

The root causes of Iran's hostility and distrust toward western powers, especially the United States, in the modern era, can be traced back to the 1953 coup. It stands as a pivotal moment in modern Iranian history, as it caused melancholia in the political and literary landscape of the country. In addition, it marked a shift away from peaceful and legal efforts to challenge imperialism toward a narrative in which violence came to be seen as the only viable path for revolutionaries to free themselves from foreign domination and reclaim control over their political destiny. Furthermore, it is important to note that the coup shattered the hopes of countless working-class Iranians who believed that Mossadegh's oil nationalization policy in favour of the proletariat would lay the foundation for a basic income system and, with it, the promise of a more just and dignified future, where the poor could rise above hardship and seize new opportunities. Decades later, that dream remains unfulfilled, fading into the shadows of history as a painful reminder of what was lost.

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<sup>14</sup>Hossein Hamedani, former commander of the IRGC Tehran Division, interview with *Javan Hamedan*, 2015.

<sup>15</sup>Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 199.

In addition to its psychological impact, the most devastating legacy of the 1953 coup lies in its long-term effects on Iran's political development. The coup did not merely overthrow a person, Mohammad Mossadegh, it overthrew a democratic elite. After the coup, a notorious secret police force was established. Its core was created by Americans and later expanded into *Savak*, a powerful apparatus of suppression within the country, famous for violation of human rights.<sup>16</sup> As a result of the brutal crackdowns, opposition newspapers, as well as nationalist and leftist organizations, were dismantled. This setback would become the Achilles heel of future political movements. In the repressive climate that followed, secular progressive forces were violently suppressed, while Islamist figures, granted relative freedom, expanded their influence nationwide. Over time, this imbalance laid the groundwork for the eventual rise of theocracy. Ironically, the religious establishment that replaced the monarchy included figures who had once opposed Mossadegh himself. Regardless of their shortcomings and failures, the negative experience of the coup fuelled conspiracy theories and reinforced a widespread belief among many conservative citizens in post-revolutionary Iran that any unrest against the government should be viewed with suspicion, as likely orchestrated by foreign powers. Some have gone so far as to support harsh reactionary measures to prevent what they fear could be another American-backed coup.

In order to fully grasp the root causes of such a view, it is important to examine the coup's historical background. The end of Reza Shah's authoritarian reign in September 1941 led to a relatively open political atmosphere, allowing for broader public engagement in politics. During this period, a new generation of activists emerged, mostly idealistic youth inspired by global anticolonial movements. This generation, along with the rapid expansion of the independent press, contributed to an unprecedented level of political dynamism. The Iranian intellectual community also became polarized between two dominant ideological currents: nationalism and communism. Each of these camps sought to mobilize urban masses based on their own interpretations of independence and freedom, aiming to challenge western influence, especially British hegemony. Within this context, Mohammad Mossadegh emerged as a highly respected politician who, after years of

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<sup>16</sup>Mark J. Gasiorowski, 'The Coup d'Etat Against Mosaddeq,' in *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 257-258.

exile and marginalization, returned to public life. Together with a group of nationalist statesmen, he founded the National Front of Iran, which quickly became a key player in the political scene during the late 1940s. One of its central goals was the nationalization of Iran's oil industry and the termination of British domination, an issue that resonated deeply in intellectual circles. Despite widespread skepticism among both the public and the elite regarding Iran's ability to stand up to the British Empire, the National Front under Mossadegh's leadership pursued its goal relentlessly. Eventually, in March 1951, the Oil Nationalization Act was passed in the Iranian parliament, and shortly after, in April 1951, Mossadegh was appointed Prime Minister. The nationalization of the oil industry was not only a major political achievement, it also gave legitimacy and popularity to Mossadegh's government. For the first time in more than a century of foreign domination and interference, many Iranians felt that a new chapter in their history had begun, one defined by national sovereignty, independence, and dignity.

The British government employed a combination of legal and technical measures in an attempt to counter Iran's oil nationalization campaign. Among their actions were filing formal complaints with the United Nations Security Council and referring the dispute to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. In a calculated move, they also planned the withdrawal of all British engineers and technicians from Iran, aiming to paralyze the country's oil industry. Nevertheless, Mossadegh's government achieved significant success on both fronts. Internationally, Iran defended its legal position before the Security Council and secured a favourable ruling from the International Court of Justice. Domestically, the determination of Iranian oil personnel restored operations and allowed the government to manage the industry without relying on foreigners.

After its initial measures failed to produce the desired outcome, the British government resorted to other strategies to undermine the Iranian national movement. One such strategy was the imposition of an international boycott on Iranian oil, using its influence over global markets and major oil companies to prevent the purchase of Iranian oil.<sup>17</sup> In addition, in June 1951, the British Royal Navy deployed warships in the Persian Gulf to block or confiscate Iranian oil tankers to cut

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<sup>17</sup>Wm. Roger Louis, 'Britain and the Overthrow of the Mosaddeq Government,' in *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 149.

off Iran's oil exports and reduce its foreign revenue to a minimum. Mossadegh sought to resolve the crisis by securing financial support from the United States. However, the Truman administration refused to provide loans or direct economic assistance to Iran. On the other side, the Soviet Union also showed little interest in supporting Mossadegh's government, largely due to his adoption of a policy of non-alignment toward the super powers. As a result, Iran found itself effectively isolated on the international stage, caught between the two blocs of the Cold War without substantial backing from either. In response, Mossadegh's administration adopted a set of domestic economic policies aimed at mitigating the financial impact of the oil embargo. Nevertheless, the sanctions had adverse effects. The decline in revenues, combined with rising inflation and shortages, placed economic pressure on lower income classes and contributed to growing public dissatisfaction. However, such attempts were not sufficient to bring down Mossadegh's government, as he continued to enjoy considerable support across various segments of Iranian society, which served as a major obstacle to its collapse.

The British government did not confine its actions solely to sanctions and threats. Following Dwight D. Eisenhower's victory in the 1952 U.S presidential elections, Washington's policies became aligned with those of London, leading to the strengthened intelligence cooperation between the two countries. MI6 and CIA jointly planned TPAJAX, a covert operation to overthrow Mossadegh. To advance this objective, they established an intelligence station in Cyprus, which served as the headquarters for coordinating operations from abroad.<sup>18</sup> In parallel, the United States Embassy in Tehran was designated as the central command hub to oversee the operation within Iran. A team of CIA field officers was assigned to coordinate and manage the operation within the country. Within this framework, a network of Iranian military officers, politicians, journalists, mullahs, and monarchist supporters engaged in efforts to undermine Mossadegh's government through tactics such as assassination, unrest, psychological warfare, and organized propaganda.<sup>19</sup> By the summer of 1953, developments had reached their peak; at this point, serious opposition to

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 129.

<sup>19</sup>Fakhreddin Azimi, 'Unseating Mosaddeq: The Configuration and Role of Domestic Forces,' in *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 82; See also Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2003), 165-166.

Mossadegh had emerged even within the National Front, and support for the Shah's monarchy had grown.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, on August 19, 1953, Mossadegh's national government was overthrown in a military coup that coincided with urban unrest, allowing the Shah to seize the power and control the country with the support of the army.

The British regained control over the Iranian oil industry, but since the United States had played a critical role in the coup, American companies demanded a share in Iran's oil. To preserve the facade of nationalization, the National Iranian Oil Company, founded by Mossadegh, was not dissolved but was no longer fully in charge. An international consortium was formed, in which British Petroleum held 40 percent of the shares, five American companies collectively held another 40 percent, and the remaining shares were divided between Royal Dutch/Shell and Compagnie Francaise des Pétroles. The consortium agreed to share its profits with Iran on a fifty-fifty basis but refused to open its books to Iranian auditors or allow Iranians onto its board of directors.<sup>21</sup>

In his first post-coup radio address, the Shah expressed gratitude for the selfless and uncompensated uprising of the Iranian people, describing it as a voluntarily effort to support the monarchy and safeguard national traditions.<sup>22</sup> However, according to testimonies from CIA officials involved in the operation, the mob led by *lutis* that rebelled against Mossadegh and supported the Shah was the result of manipulation and payment by American orchestrators.<sup>23</sup> For decades, this issue has been a subject of debate and contention between supporters and opponents of the royalist monarchy within the Iranian diaspora. While many monarchists regard the public's role in the overthrow of Mossadegh's government as an ideological movement in support of the monarchy, opponents argue that the participants were mercenary mobs, mobilized to stage an artificial uprising to assist and legitimize the coup. This fundamental controversy was one of the central issues I sought to explore during the course of my research for the film.

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<sup>20</sup>Roosevelt, *Countercoup*, 151.

<sup>21</sup>Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men*, 195-196.

<sup>22</sup>Shah's public address on Radio Tehran, 22 August 1953.

<sup>23</sup>Kermit Roosevelt Interview with NBC News in 1979 and Richard Cottam Interview with Granada TV in 1985.

### 3 Films

The emergence of the *luti* type in films, often depicted as a character dressed in a suit and wearing a velvet fedora, can be traced back to the early industrialization of Iranian cinema in the period following World War II. This character type first appeared briefly in a notable scene from *Chehreh-ye āshnā* (*The Familiar Face*, 1953), where, in an overly dramatized and exaggerated moment, a *luti*-like figure kills a young man in a café. In the subsequent scene, an upper class man recounts the incident, now reported in the newspaper, to a woman, disparaging the *luti*'s action and derisively describing it as a fight between two knife-wielders over a woman. A few years later, a more prominent portrayal of the *luti* character in cinema, commonly referred to as *jahel*, appears in *Zālem balā* (*The Naughty One*, 1957) as the helper of the protagonist, a young woman who is trying to protect herself from the sexual gaze of men. Following this, and particularly after the commercial success of *Avval heykal* (*The Strong Man*, 1960), *luti* quickly became a more recurring and recognizable character type in Iranian cinema, often portrayed in leading roles and featured in more than one hundred films over the next two decades (see appendix).

Although often assumed to be a cinematic invention, the *jahel* figure, as a modern fictional representation of *luti*, originates from *Esmāl dar New York* (*Esmal in New York*), a serialized story by Hossein Madani, published between 1954 and 1955 in a widely circulated newspaper of the time. These stories, later compiled into a bestselling book<sup>24</sup>, laid the groundwork for the *luti* as a dramatic type. The book narrates the story of Esmal (short for Esmaeil), a poor but patriotic *luti* who is forced to work as a truck driver for the Allied forces in Iran during World War II, transporting ammunition from the Persian Gulf in the south to the Soviet border in the north. After befriending some of his American colleagues, he is invited by one of them to visit the United States. Seizing the opportunity, he travels to New York in 1945, where he encounters a range of events and experiences throughout his journey. The cover illustration, which shows Esmal with a stern expression in front of the Statue of Liberty, visually reflects the book's deeply critical stance toward the United States. The narrative explicitly challenges and critiques the promoted idealized image of America

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<sup>24</sup>Hossein Madani, *Esmāl dar New York* [*Esmal in New York*] (Tehran: Sadaf, 1969).

as a utopia. Although Esmal is impressed by the technological advancements, he satirically critiques concepts such as American peace, laws, and sexual norms. From his perspective, Western civilization is responsible for igniting a devastating world war that led to the deaths of millions and the destruction of numerous countries. He also adopts a critical stance toward American imperialism, accusing it of manipulating Iranian public opinion to seize the country's oil resources and promote the consumption of American products. Esmal even comments on cinema, criticizing it as a tool for promoting false images of both the West and the East, and refers to the behind-the-scenes dealings of American film companies which, according to him, have hindered the development of a local film industry in Iran.

The critical view of American cinema as an obstacle to the development of Iran's indigenous film industry was not disconnected from the realities of the time. Following World War II, and especially after the 1953 coup, Western productions, particularly American films, entered Iranian theatres on a large scale. This influx played a major role in the emergence and growth of the dubbing industry in Iran. In contrast, Iran's newborn film production industry, which was far less advanced than American cinema in terms of technical and narrative sophistication, faced serious challenges in competing within the domestic market. Since dubbing foreign films was significantly less expensive than producing Iranian films, many investors such as the Rashidian brothers, who were key figures in the coup and leveraged their foreign connections to import British and American films,<sup>25</sup> chose to allocate their funds to dubbing and screening these films rather than supporting domestic production. As a result, Iranian filmmakers turned to local subjects rooted in the Iranian culture, stories and themes that were absent in foreign films. In doing so, they hoped to draw Iranian audiences toward domestic cinema. In this context, the character of Esmal attracted the attention of some Iranian filmmakers. In the post-coup atmosphere, marked by a new wave of modernization and the growing influence of Western culture, he had emerged as a popular symbol of resistance to Westernization and a call for cultural nativism among the lower middle class. As such, Esmal, a *jahel* figure who simultaneously reflected the concerns of the traditional urban masses and

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<sup>25</sup>Interview with Ali Kasmai, founding director of voice acting in Iran, conducted by the author in 2010.

responded to filmmakers' desire for a native hero, became a model for the depiction of *luti* character in Iranian cinema.<sup>26</sup> This marked the birth of the *jaheli* subgenre, which portrayed the *luti* character in the style of Esmal, speaking a southern Tehran dialect and dressed in a black suit, a white camp collar shirt, leather shoes, carrying a handkerchief or thin chain, and wearing an outdated fedora that visually set him apart from the rest of urban society.

Although there was an early attempt to portray this character within the framework of social realist cinema, most notably in *Jonūnb-e shahr* (*South of the City*, 1958), the *luti* character was predominately featured in films that were primarily entertainment-oriented and paid little attention to social realities. Regardless, the *jahel*, as someone who lived by his own codes of chivalry and enforced his own rules within his environment amid the rise of modernity, became a central character in some of the most popular films of the 1960s. During this period, *luti* is typically depicted as a local hero who firmly defends the sanctity of his neighbourhood against problems such as the emergence of Westernized lustful men. For instance, in *Lāt-e javānmard* (*The Chivalrous Laat*, 1958), which is the first film to feature a *luti* character in a leading role, he is portrayed as an honourable *jahel* who tries to prevent a modern man from making sexual advances toward a young woman entrusted to his care by her father. This tension marks the beginning of a drama that leads the *luti* to the courtroom, where he is faced with a murder charge, and brings him in direct confrontation with a new social order shaped by modernity. In this modern nation-state, values such as social reputation, trust, friendship, and honesty have eroded significantly and hold little relevance.

Although the *jaheli* films of this period typically depict *luti* as a figure who confronts minor threats within his neighbourhood and ultimately resolves these conflicts without resorting to serious violence, often through light scuffles, playful physical gestures, or even a simple piece of advice, a notable change occurs twelve years after the emergence of this subgenre. This transformation introduces a new phase by portraying the *luti* through a different worldview and in a more complex relationship with his social environment. Masoud Kimiai's *Qaisar* (1969) marked a turning point

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<sup>26</sup>Mohsen Neghabi and Ali Sheikhmehdi, *Vākāvi-ye avāmel-e peydāyesh-e shakhsīyat-e jāhel-e kolāh makhmalī dar cinemā-ye āmme-pasand-e Irān* [*Investigating the Factors of the Creation of the Velvet Hat Ignorance in Iranian Popular Cinema*] *Fasl-nāmeḥ-ye elmi-ye jāme shenāsi-ye farhang va honar* [Scientific Quarterly of the Sociology of Culture and Art] 1(1) (1398 [2019]): 91-92.

in this trajectory and portrays *luti* as a radicalized, vengeful character who does not hesitate to use intense violence to achieve his objective, a depiction that corresponds more closely to the real-life behaviour of *lutis* in society.

The film skilfully uses modern technical and narrative styles to depict the traditional *luti* theme within the structure of a compelling family drama driven by the honour-shame paradigm set in the 1960s. It tells the story of Qaisar, a young man who sets out in Tehran to avenge the rape and suicide of his younger sister and the staged-suicide murder of his older *jahel* brother by killing the three tough-guy Agh Mangol brothers responsible for the crimes. The film portrays the world of *luti* as extending beyond minor local threats, depicting him facing an era in which values such as chivalry have vanished and been replaced by unrestrained thuggery, which the police are either unable or unwilling to control.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, it raises questions about the role of the modern police as an apparatus that appears to prioritize the maintenance of order over the pursuit of justice. Qaisar views the world as an ecosystem filled with evil, dishonesty, and unfairness, and in order to confront it, he is even willing to sacrifice everything and push himself to the brink of destruction. This sombre perspective, which concludes with a tragic ending for the protagonist, stands in clear contrast to the happy endings of earlier *jaheli* films. It reflects the dominance of modernity and its influence on the social environment that once nurtured *luti* figures, leaving little space for their presence or growth. The new generation of emerging *lutis* has lost its sense of connection to its surroundings and has fallen into a state of alienation. In other words, *Qaisar* presents the tragedy of the end of *luti-gari* in the age of modernity.<sup>28</sup>

The widespread acclaim from critics, along with the film's remarkable box office success, turned *Qaisar* into the most renowned and influential film in the tough-guy genre and one of the most iconic classics in the history of Iranian cinema. Even in the years following the Islamic revolution, unauthorized VHS copies of the film continued to attract a wide audience. This un-

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<sup>27</sup>Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 295.

<sup>28</sup>Yousef Abazari and Ali Papeli-Yazdi *Barresi-ye taghābol-e sonnat va modernite dar film-hāye jāheli bā takid bar olgoo-hāye lāt va lūti dar do film-e lāt-e javānmard va qeysar* [A Study of Confrontation between Tradition and Modernity in Jaheli Films, with Emphasis on the Luti and Laat Archetypes in the Films Laat-e Javanmard and Qaisar] *Faslnāme-ye Anjoman-e Irāni Motāle'āt-e Farhangi va Ertebātāt* [Quarterly Journal of The Iranian Association for Cultural Studies and Communication], 9 (32) (1392 [2013]): 30-33.

precedented success promoted many producers in subsequent years to increase the productions that revolved around *luti* narratives. However, for nearly a decade, the image of *luti* in Iranian cinema was portrayed in a stereotypical and superficial manner. They displayed the external markers of the archetype, such as the dress code and the dialect, but lacked the internal psychology that truly defined the character. A rare exception is *Dāsh Ākol* (1971), a poetic and introspective portrayal of a pre-modern *luti* figure whose forbidden love for a young woman placed in his care challenges his commitment to the *luti* code of honour and sparks an inner conflict that leads to excessive, self-destructive drinking. Despite its mythologized portrayal of the real-life protagonist and events, the film offers an authentic depiction of the subculture, one that goes beyond a superficial representation to explore the deeper layers of *luti-gari*. Rather than using *Dash Akol* as a model for the subgenre and engaging with the complex layers of a cultural phenomenon with deep ethical and historical roots, the cinema of this era largely reproduced a simplified and entertaining version of *luti* as a shallow, violent, emotional, excessively extroverted, and even comedic figure. In many of these films, the *luti* appeared as a performative type, simultaneously adhering to traditional and sometimes even superstitious values, while also operating within modern spaces shaped by Western influence, such as cabarets, and engaging in volatile relationships with women. As a result, he drifted away from the original *jahel* persona, which had once symbolized resistance to Westernization. Such depictions, which were mainly due to commercial priorities to attract audiences through melodrama, exaggerated violence, and sexual provocation, often reduced *luti* to a caricature, causing both religious and secular critics to label such films as *mobtazal* (sleazy) and *monharef* (deviant).<sup>29</sup>

The representation of *luti* in Iranian cinema, even after the revolution, has fallen under the influence of the conventions of the *jaheli* subgenre. These films were predominately based on fictitious narratives, rather than grounded in a historically and socially informed understanding of the subculture. As a result, the absence of a documentary-based perspective on *luti* has led to the continued reproduction of a stereotypical and distorted image of this character and its culture

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<sup>29</sup>Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Volume 2, 262.

in narrative cinema. In recent years, some efforts have been made to present a more authentic portrayal of modern *luti* on the screen by paying more attention to its history. The Iranian state-controlled media corporation, IRIB, has broadcast a television movie<sup>30</sup> and two medium-length documentaries<sup>31</sup> on the life of Tayyeb. Furthermore, a feature fiction film released in 2024 portrays Tayyeb's trial and the final moments of his life.<sup>32</sup> However, these depictions continue to be shaped either by enduring conventions or by strong influences from religious and political motives. Funded by the state, these productions have glorified Tayyeb and recast him as a hero and martyr, depicting him as a morally upright and devoted *luti* who dedicated his life to defending Islam and supporting the clergy and the core values of the revolution. This portrayal stands in stark contrast to how he was represented in the official narratives of the previous regime. Similarly, prior to the revolution, the state promoted Shaban Jafari as a symbol of loyalty to national values. However, following the revolution, this image was fundamentally altered and he came to be represented as an anti-national mercenary thug in film and television.

Although it cannot be denied that both Tayyeb and Shaban were two of the most prominent *luti* figures of their generation, the focus on them has overshadowed many others from the same era whose names and roles have been largely forgotten. My thesis required extensive field research to uncover the names and images of individuals who had been forgotten, along with aspects of their history that were omitted from official accounts and mainstream narratives.

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<sup>30</sup>*Tayyeb* (2011).

<sup>31</sup>*Se sāl va se rooz* (2013); *Tayyeb* (2016).

<sup>32</sup>*Sobh-e edām* (2024).

## 4 Process

### 4.1 Pre-production

My first exposure to the role of *lutis* in the 1953 coup goes back to my grandfather, an admirer of Mossadegh, who shared his memories with me when I was a child. He had witnessed their mobilization to participate in the riot and often recalled their attempts to influence the political landscape by rigging a parliamentary election in post-coup Iran in favour of a royalist candidate. He was also acquainted with some *luti* figures, such as Morteza 'Leopard', who had participated in the coup and later made a living in post-revolutionary Iran as a loan shark. Later, I was drawn to the intriguing faces of tough guys and old *lutis* in the traditional teahouses of the city. It ignited a desire to uncover their identities and sparked my interest in the untold stories of common people, voices that are often missing from official histories, and the narratives that are frequently lost over time simply because they do not belong to kings, presidents, ministers, or generals.

Years later, after moving to Canada, I returned to Iran only to find that they had disappeared. During my 2010 trip to Iran, while conducting research on the coup, I came into contact with a man named Heydar. During our conversation, he mentioned that he used to be friends with a *luti* named Amir Rostami, known as 'the Champ' (*Amir Pahlevoon*), who might be of use to my research. I had already come across the name in the archive police records as a suspect in the abduction and murder of Iran's police chief in 1953, and therefore expressed a strong interest in meeting him for an interview. Together, we went to Amir's restaurant in south Tehran, only to find that he no longer managed the business. Instead, it was being run by his son, who was unwilling to cooperate. With some persistence, I convinced him to contact Amir to request an interview. However, Amir was reluctant to revisit the past, preferred to live in silence, and avoided any form of publicity. Despite multiple attempts to persuade him over the phone, my request ended up unsuccessful. A few days later, I flew back to Canada. However, the experience was enough to revive an old interest in the subject of *luti*.

In 2012, Professor Laurence Green encouraged me to produce a film on the 1953 coup for

the department's Master's program. I proposed to the faculty the production of a documentary centred on interviews with a group of American, British, and Iranian political figures who had either closely witnessed or directly participated in the events. This group included former military officers, diplomats, state officials, journalists, and political activists from various factions living across different countries around the world. I began travelling and filming interviews in Canada, England, France, and the United States, before heading to Iran to interview a group of former political figures who still resided there. Nevertheless, Amir Rostami remained on my mind, and I found myself more curious than ever to uncover his role in the coup. Yet, with the exception of figures like Tayyeb and Shaban, very little had been documented about Amir or the *lutis* of his generation in written sources. I reached out to several Iranian historians to see if they could offer insight, but even they had very little to add, as most of them had not even heard his name. It became clear that uncovering Amir's story would require more than just consulting scholarly sources; it would require a serious field investigation to bring his history to light.

I decided to make another attempt to see if I could find an elderly *luti* for the project. I turned to internet and published books,<sup>33</sup> extracting names from various sources to compile a list of *lutis* from that generation, which I then used in 2013 to track down the surviving members. Unfortunately, everyone on the list had passed away, except Amir, whose health had severely deteriorated and who remained firm in his refusal to participate in any way. Capturing the testimony of a *luti* involved in the 1953 coup seemed impossible, and I had no choice but to set aside that aspect of the history and return to my original plan: completing the documentary by focusing on the memories and testimonies of the political elites of the era. Shortly after, Amir passed away and his name was crossed off my list. The death of the last *luti* on my list was deeply disappointing, but it also pushed me to seriously consider exploring their role in the events of 1953.

Although much attention has been paid to the role of foreign governments in the coup, and

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<sup>33</sup>Sina Mirzaei, *Tayyeb dar gozar-e luti hā* [*Tayyeb in the Passage of Lutis*] (Tehran: Nashr-e Media, 2003); Sina Mirzaei and Seyed Mohammad Reza Hosseini, *Az sargozasht-e luti hā* [*From the Story of Lutis*] (Tehran: Nashr-e Media, 2004).

several documentaries<sup>34</sup> and a fiction<sup>35</sup> have explored the events in the context of the U.S. and British involvement, as well as domestic political conflicts between Iranian factions, little attention has been paid to the role of the *lutis*. This limited focus may be attributed to other filmmakers' lack of access to these figures or their unwillingness to cooperate with their production teams. The absence of significant attention to this aspect of history further motivated me to create a film exploring the lives of *lutis* and their role in the events of that era.

This thesis film, deemed exempt from the Research Ethics Protocol due to its creative nature, began as I set out to find other *lutis*, individuals whose names were not on my list or recorded anywhere. In the summer of 2014, I spent six weeks in the old neighbourhoods of south Tehran, where most *lutis* lived in the 1950s, walking from one district to another, asking locals if any of the former *lutis* were still alive. This quest led me to a handful of them while also offering a deeper insight into life in that part of the city, where signs of poverty, addiction, and prostitution were visible everywhere, especially at night when social dysfunction and class divisions became even more apparent. This exposure inspired me to envision a new documentary about impoverished south Tehran in the 1950s, a space where *lutis* were local celebrities who shaped and dominated the politics of the street.

I began by gathering a small collection of old photographs and home movies from the aging *lutis* and their families. To further expand my archive, I visited several institutions, including the Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies (IICHS), the Islamic Revolution Document Centre (IRDC), the National Film Archive of Iran, and the Library of Iran Parliament, in search of audio-visual materials related to the subject. Although their archives included digital copies of old newspapers and photographs, some of which were later printed on newsprint paper, artificially aged, and used in the production, they contained very little relevant footage. Thus, producing an interview-driven expository documentary enriched with archival footage did not seem to be a feasible approach for the subject. A hybrid style that combines different documentary modes

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<sup>34</sup>*End of Empire: Iran* (1985), *Anatomy of a Coup: The CIA in Iran* (2000), *American Coup* (2010), *An Iranian Odyssey* (2010), *Mohākeme* (2015), *Kūdetā* (2017), *Āghā-ye Nokhost Vazir* (2017), and *Coup 53* (2019) are among the notable examples.

<sup>35</sup>*Amaliyāt-e Ajax* (2015).

appeared to be better suited for creating a more engaging and visually compelling narrative.

Recreating the look and atmosphere of Tehran at the time of the 1953 coup posed a significant challenge. I chose to rely on enduring locations, places in Tehran that have remained largely unchanged over the past several decades, to evoke a sense of nostalgia within the heart of the modern city. Two Iranian fictions were my influences for the *mise-en-scène*; *Sorb (The Lead, 1988)*, a drama set in 1948 and filmed in the remaining old buildings of modern Tehran, inspired location scouting, and *Ragbār (Downpour, 1972)*, which used numerous locations from various districts as pieces of a puzzle to construct a cohesive image of one neighbourhood, was another important influence. Similarly, old locations such as narrow alleys, traditional homes, crumbling ruins, a graveyard, garage, workshop, bazaar, carpet shop, prayer house, zurkhaneh, bathhouse, and teahouses, scattered across various neighbourhoods were chosen to be used like puzzle pieces to construct a visual ecosystem reminiscent of Tehran in the 1950s as well as to show the brokenness of life for its citizens.

My aim was to document the locations that once served as arenas for *luti* activities, before they become completely erased, and to portray them within the narrative framework of the film. *Ladri di biciclette (Bicycle Thieves, 1948)* and Antonio's search for his stolen bicycle in postwar Rome served as a major source of inspiration for this approach. Heydar, an elderly man from the neighbourhood who had closely interacted with several of *lutis* in his youth, proved to be the ideal choice to serve this role. His selection was primarily due to his romanticized view of the *luti* subculture, which made him a good fit for portraying a character on a quest through the old neighbourhoods.

I met with Heydar and invited him to be part of the film. He immediately agreed to participate, being a cinephile himself. The first step was to get to know Heydar's life story and see if there were any elements that could be used to enhance the film's narrative. I held several interview sessions with him, during which he recounted his life story in detail, from birth to the present. I recorded the sessions using an audio recorder and later reviewed the recordings, taking notes on any statements or incidents that felt interesting or relevant to the subject of the film. Elements such

as growing up in poverty, child labour, experiencing abuse in the workplace, thoughts of salvation from suffering, and idealizing *lutis*, aligned closely with the narrative ideas I had envisioned. Furthermore, his complex and sometimes conflicted feelings toward *lutis* offered a compelling avenue for exploration. Adding further depth to his character was his lingering emotional wound caused by the downfall of Mossadegh, whom he viewed as the only Iranian politician who truly cared for the underprivileged. Heydar's childhood experiences played a central role in shaping the narrative frame of the film. Inspired by the use of children's perspectives in *Iraq in Fragments* (2006), his narration as a former child labourer provided a way to tell the story of the 1953 coup through the lens of his own suffering, creating a deeper emotional resonance for the audience. Finally, I drafted a narrative about the forgotten history of the *lutis* of Tehran in the 1950s, told through the eyes of a young boy whose life was shaped by poverty, abuse, and political turmoil.

Finding the aging *lutis* was one challenge; convincing them to speak on camera was another. Unlike Heydar, who agreed easily, most of them were reluctant to talk in front of a camera. These uneducated old men had spent most of their lives under tyranny, suppression, and censorship. Many were cautious and fearful that something they said might lead to serious consequences. The only way to gain their cooperation was by spending time with them and earning their trust. Nevertheless, this meant the production would be a lengthy process, particularly due to the travel and residency restrictions I faced as a citizen who had not completed my mandatory military service in Iran. It was clear that the process would require a great deal of patience, diplomacy, and creative workarounds to persuade these individuals to cooperate, appear on camera for the first time, and share their stories and memories. I spent time with each of them to build genuine relationships, and those moments gave me deeper insight into the world of *lutis*, allowing me not only to understand them on a personal level but also to break the ice and gradually help some feel comfortable enough to open up in front of the camera.

## 4.2 Production

Film production in Iran requires an approval from a recognized media institution, along with reference letters to gain the cooperation of various organizations. I received the initial permit and letters from the Iranian Youth Cinema Society, which allowed me to acquire the necessary authorization from Naji Honar, the media division of the Police Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to film in outdoor public spaces. My financial situation was not suitable for starting a new project, as most of my budget had already been spent on research, travel, and interviews for another production. However, the advanced age and poor health of some of the key individuals in the new project left no room for further delays. It was clear from the outset that this would have to be a micro-budget, guerrilla-style production. I already had a small crew assisting with the other project in Tehran, so I brought the same team on board to help shoot this new film. Roles such as production manager, assistant director, gaffer, and camera assistant had to be omitted, and the production team was reduced to the bare minimum to keep costs low. The core team consisted of just a cinematographer, a sound recordist, and myself. In addition, a few friends and one of my cousins volunteered as boom operators and production assistants, helping with equipment setup and logistics. In essence, I had to take on every major role aside from cinematography and sound recording to make up for the absence of a full crew. Cinematography officially began and continued over several years, taking place during each of my trips to Iran, while facing numerous challenges including permit renewals, accidents, unexpected travel, illness, pandemic, deaths, and other complications.

The visual language of the film was shaped not only by economic constraints but also by deliberate aesthetic choices. I wanted the production to resemble classical Iranian films, resonating with the story's time period. The minimalist cinematography relies on natural lighting, static compositions, and simple camerawork to evoke a sense of realism, drawing inspiration from Iranian New Wave cinema, particularly *Tabiat-e bijān* (*Still Life*, 1974), which relied heavily on static shots. The primary reason for using static longer takes was to establish a slow-paced rhythm in the present-day scenes, aiming to reflect the calm and introspective spirit of the elderly characters. *Khāneh siāh ast* (*The House is Black*, 1962) and *Gāv* (*The Cow*, 1969) were other inspirations, especially for

their use of natural lighting, except in some indoor scenes where additional artificial lighting was necessary.

The scenes featuring the elderly *lutis* formed the essential backbone of the film's content. The plan was to give priority to these scenes by approaching them individually and filming their interviews one at a time. A film that strongly influenced these segments was *Echos aus einem düsteren Reich* (*Echoes from a Sombre Empire*, 1990). Its use of dialogue-based interviews presented as natural conversations was particularly influential, as it allowed the interviews to feel more organic and authentic. The film follows a journalist with a personal connection to the subject matter, a role that I intended similarly for Heydar in my film, as someone with firsthand experience related to the *luti* subculture. The interviews were conducted as one on one conversations between Heydar and each of the *lutis*. This approach not only reduced the film's reliance on archival material but also enhanced the energy and intimacy of the interviews by presenting them in a more conversational back and forth style, made possible by Heydar's warm and approachable personality. At times, additional participants, often friends of the *luti*, were invited to join the scene to encourage more lively and engaging discussions. This approach required a higher level of coordination as I had to schedule interviews and locations with the participants, taking into account everyone's availability, while also coordinating with the crew to ensure transportation to the designated sites, a task proven to be challenging in the absence of a production manager. Despite the difficult working conditions, the advantage of having a small team was that it was easier to create an intimate atmosphere for the participants, allowing them to engage in conversation without feeling intimidated by the presence of a large-size production crew.

Initially, these scenes were filmed with two cameras, but a third was later added to the setup: one on the interviewer (Heydar), one on the interviewee (*luti*), and a third for the master shot, which included all the characters. In the early stages of production, I used a Panasonic AF100, a Canon 7D, and a Sony Z5U paired with an Atomos Ninja 2 recorder, as these were the only cameras available to me at the time. Later, I transitioned to Blackmagic Cinema Cameras, which offered higher bit rates and greater dynamic range, significantly improving image quality. My background

in cinematography and sound recording enabled me to step in as an additional cameraman or sound recordist, which allowed us to continue shooting with multiple camera setups without expanding the crew. Over time, I grew accustomed to solo-shooting and handling setups with up to three cameras, even when the cinematographer was unavailable due to last-minute, unforeseen circumstances. This flexibility allowed me to stay on schedule and avoid jeopardizing a rare opportunity to film a *luti* who had only reluctantly agreed to participate; rescheduling could easily have given him the chance to withdraw.

The interviews were organized around four main topics: the 1953 coup, Amir Rostami, Tayyeb's life and legacy, and the personal stories of each *luti*. The reason for this variety was to discover which participants would produce compelling content and help shape the overall focus of the film. Heydar served as a proxy, and I directed him before each interview on what to focus on. I then tried to remain as unobtrusive as possible by applying a non-interfering observational style, adopting a fly on the wall approach. Although this method was often effective and produced excellent results, it was not always successful. Heydar had a tendency to deviate from the main topic and drift into unrelated areas. Nevertheless, these digressions occasionally led to interesting discussions, that was not always the case. As a result, there were times when I had to step in and guide the conversation to ensure it remained productive. In this way, the production gradually shifted from a direct cinema approach to something closer to *cinéma vérité*.

A second interview session with the participant was immediately scheduled if it became clear during the first session that he had the mental or emotional capacity to be the subject of a provoked interview. Unlike the first, this follow-up was not conducted as a dialogue with Heydar. Instead, the *luti* would return to the same location, maintaining continuity by wearing the same clothing and recreating the original setup. The second interview was conducted by me from behind the camera, sitting in Heydar's previous position, while filming the participant from different angles. This process depended on the level of willingness of each *luti* to participate in the film. If, during the initial acquaintance period, he demonstrated a strong interest in cooperating, the sequence of interviews would be reversed. Inspired by the idea of the camera acting as catalyst in *Chronique*

*d'un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*, 1961), this approach, used on multiple occasions, allowed me to supplement the original conversations with emotional or self-reflective content. The same approach was used in parts of the video interview I later conducted with Heydar about himself, which yielded good results. The opening segments of Heydar's interview seen in the first minutes of the film demonstrate this method.

The effort to blur the line between documentary and fiction has been an ongoing exploration in cinema for several decades. Directors from the Italian Neo-realist and French New Wave movements made significant contributions to the development of this approach. In Iranian cinema, Abbas Kiarostami took this approach to new heights through his hybrid experiments, creating unscripted fictions using documentary elements. I was particularly influenced by *Close-Up* (1990) and *Zir-e derakhtān-e zeytūn* (*Through the Olive Trees*, 1994), the use of staging and directed acting within a documentary framework, and the seamless blending of documentary and fiction in a way that makes the two indistinguishable. I followed a similar tradition in my pursuit of a comparable effect within documentary cinema, a film that appears to be a documentary even while incorporating fictional elements. In other words, the film aims to create an experience where it becomes difficult for the audience to distinguish between documentary and fiction, allowing everything to be perceived as part of a unified documentary narrative.

Despite the presence of powerful documentary elements in Heydar's life story, it lacked certain key components essential to the narrative I had envisioned. For instance, he had no recollection of the oil nationalization movement, which I regarded as a key moment in the story. At this point, I had to depart from a purist approach to documentary filmmaking and prioritize cinematic expression over journalistic fidelity. Inspired by a true story Heydar told about his father dividing cookie crumbs he had brought home from the street on New Year's Eve, I wrote a fictionalized episode in which Heydar recalls the moment the oil was nationalized. A fundamental challenge in recording the supplementary narration was Heydar's illiteracy and his inability to read from a script. To address this, I turned to improvisation. Each statement was first explained to Heydar in detail, after which he was asked to improvise the content. If the improvisation did not succeed, he was asked

to repeat the lines after me. This often required numerous takes until he could deliver them with a natural tone and the appropriate emotional expression.

The plot that was written for Heydar's childhood narrative included a character arc that went from idealizing *lutis* to ultimately rejecting them. I included specific lines of narration in which Heydar critically reflects on that world, linking his inner journey to the 1953 coup and the detrimental role the *lutis* played in shaping Iran's economic future. This reflection ultimately leads to his loss of interest in becoming a *luti* himself. However, the difficulty lay in the fact that this character arc could not be constructed solely from the documentary elements present in Heydar's real-life story. Kiarostami's *Khāne-ye dūst kojāst* (*Where Is the Friend's House*, 1987) was a key inspiration for my approach to resolve this issue. I was particularly influenced by the director's ability to manipulate situations and emotionally jolt a character in order to evoke a specific emotional response. This technique is reflected in the scene where Heydar, expresses regret for joining the *luti* rebellion during the coup, as well as his sorrow over the lost opportunity for a better life. In other words, the monologue was scripted, however, the displayed genuine emotions stem from his reaction to an entirely different stimulus. This moment, though fictional, was intentionally created to help shape his character arc.

The concept of blending fact and fiction also extended to visual scenes featuring Heydar in the neighbourhood, that were interwoven with staged performances, creating a balance between documentary realism and directed engagement. Although Heydar's narrative is fictionalized, I deliberately avoided taking similar liberties in representing the history of the *lutis* in order to maintain a balance between fact and fiction without compromising the documentary integrity of the subject. As a result, the film aims to preserve historical accuracy while presenting the story within the framework of a fictionalized narrative.

### **4.3 Post-production**

I tend to conduct in-depth research for my documentary projects, which often results in a large volume of recorded audio and visual material. In this case, seventeen *luti* figures were filmed

in conversation with Heydar. Half of them participated in at least one supplementary interview, including five who took part in multiple sessions. Staged scenes, B roll visuals of the city and rituals were also filmed. In addition, over a dozen hours of audio and video interviews were recorded with Heydar, covering his entire life story, including personal memories with *lutis*, his opinions and feelings about them, their legacy, sociopolitical commentaries, and performed narrations. Organization and easy access to specific content were essential to the post-production process. First, I synchronized and organized all recorded and archival materials into clearly labelled folders to ensure efficient access during editing. I transcribed and typed all interviews, adding timecodes to the transcripts to enable quick and precise access to specific moments through a simple search.

As with most documentaries, the longest phase involved reviewing the footage and transcripts to uncover the most compelling story and determine a plot structure that could be effectively built from the available material. Initially, I began constructing the plot around Heydar's journey through Tehran in search of Amir Rostami, a long-lost friend. The interviews served to present conflicting testimonies about Amir's fate and character. Although the concept worked well on paper, it did not translate effectively in practice; Amir's narrative lacked the depth and significance required to support a feature-length documentary. This narrative also required a more in-depth depiction of Heydar's life story, but the absence of relevant archive imposed significant limitations on the visual portrayal of those moments. Furthermore, placing Amir at the centre of the narrative introduced structural complexities that undermined the overall coherence of the content. I conducted test screenings to evaluate my concerns, and the feedback from my supervisor, faculty, and friends, largely validated the issues I had with the cut.

I had to distance myself from the film in order to analyze its structure more objectively, evaluate both the story and plot from different perspectives, and determine what needed to be done to resolve the issues. Motivated by the concept of 'less is more', I chose to simplify the narrative by shortening the film, removing Amir entirely, while retaining the *lutis*' testimonies about the coup and some elements of Heydar's real-life story. Rather than portraying Heydar on a physical quest to find an old friend, I re-imagined his journey as a nostalgic passage through the old neighbourhoods where

he grew up, framing it as a love letter to the great *lutis* of the era. I then recut the film to reflect this new narrative approach.

Present day footage of locations connected to Heydar's childhood, combined with visual poetry and minimal use of archival material, was used to compensate for the absence of more extensive historical footage. The coup montage was an exception, as there was no way to convey the chaos of the event without relying on archival material. Fortunately, enough footage was available to craft a sequence to depict the chaos. I used a wild drum track recorded during a religious carnival in Tehran, re-editing and aligning the movement of the archival visuals to match the rhythm of the beat, and bring the chaos to life.

Although ideally I would have used only classical Persian music, in cases where a suitable Persian track could not be found to convey the intended emotion, classical European music was incorporated into the sound design. For instance, a segment of Giuseppe Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*, specifically the progression from E minor to G major, was used in the scene where Heydar enters an old teahouse, which once served as a gathering place for *lutis*. This musical transition, evoking a shift from melancholy to optimism, aligned with his voice over narration, in which he remembers the *luti* figures who have passed away, leaving behind only their framed photographs on the wall. It also complemented the final part of his narration, which expresses his admiration for Tayyeb and the positive feelings associated with his memory. Another piece of classical European music, Franz Schubert's *Serenade (Ständchen D. 957, No.4 in E minor)*, was used in the scene where Heydar reflects on the dreams he had envisioned for his future following the nationalization of oil, dreams that were ultimately never realized. The piece's mournful, restless tone captured the sense of grief and longing expressed in his recollections.

Each scene was edited on a separate timeline, often with multiple versions created to determine the most effective cut. All scenes were brought into the master timeline, rearranged, and supplemented with additional shots placed between them to create bridges from one scene to the next and to finalize the plot, illustrating Heydar's physical and mental journey through the old neighbourhoods of Tehran as he revisits the past.

## 5 Conclusion

The 1953 coup marks a pivotal turning point in modern Iranian history. According to historical records and declassified documents, the United States government and its Iranian collaborators played a significant role in mobilizing the *lutis* to help execute the coup. While American sources often emphasize the financial motivations of this group, the research that was conducted during the process of making this documentary, suggests a more complex and heterogeneous set of incentives behind their involvement. The lower ranks of the *lutis*, who made up the majority, were primarily driven by economic incentives and emotional or collective agitations. In contrast, the leaders of the *lutis* entered the scene with deeper motivations, shaped largely by cultural and ideological concerns. Their confrontation with Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh's government reflected a reaction to the rising power of communism in Iran, an ideology they perceived as a serious threat to the traditional values of the society and to the masculine identity by which *lutis* defined themselves.

The repressive political climate following the coup, along with the rapid acceleration of Western-oriented modernization, provoked discontent among intellectuals and religious leaders. In response to these transformations, a turn toward cultural nativism and a renewed embrace of indigenous historical identity gained traction not only among traditional sectors of the society but also within segments of intelligentsia. Within this context, the *luti* ethos, deeply rooted in the traditions of Iranian society, emerged as a symbolic form of resistance and rebellion against Westernization. Consequently, the *luti*, who had previously played a role in shaping the post-coup political order and had, by the late 1950s and especially throughout the 1960s, entered into a confrontational discourse with the ruling establishment, was re-imagined in the cinematic representations of the period as a local folk hero. This figure came to be celebrated and admired particularly by the urban traditional masses, drawing many of them to the cinema.

Although a small number of notable films were produced within the *jaheli* subgenre of Iranian cinema, the majority of works are superficial and lack artistic and thematic depth, having been made primarily for commercial exploitations. These films often present a distorted, exaggerated, and caricatured portrayal of *luti* culture and identity, a misrepresentation that has continued to

influence the depiction of *lutis* from the second Pahlavi era (1941-1979) in the fictional narratives of the Iranian cinema and television to this day. On the other hand, documentary cinema has also been limited in addressing this subject, with most works portraying the culture and history of the *lutis* through a distorted and censored lens, serving the propaganda needs of the political regimes. *LAAT* is an independent approach in filmmaking to depict *luti* and its modern history in an alternative light.

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33. *Zir-e derakhtān-e zeytūn* [Through the Olive Trees], Abbas Kiarostami, Iran, 1994.

# Appendix

## Films Featuring the *Luti* Character in Iranian Cinema (1957–1979)

1. *Zālem Balā*
2. *Shabneshini dar Jahannam*
3. *Lāt-e Javānmard*
4. *Jonūb-e Shahr*
5. *Doshman-e Zan*
6. *Arous-e Farāri*
7. *Ghāsed-e Behesht*
8. *Rozaneh-ye Omīd*
9. *Dast-e Taqdir*
10. *Be-Setārehā*
11. *Inam Ye Jūreshe*
12. *Avval Heykal*
13. *Dūstan-e Yekrang*
14. *Shir-forūsh*
15. *Dokhtari Faryād Mikeshad*
16. *Ali Vāksi*
17. *Kolāh Makhmali*
18. *Varparideh*
19. *Mardhā va Jāddehā*
20. *Mard-e Meydān*
21. *Bā-Ma 'refāt-hā*
22. *Mādar-e Fadākār*
23. *Zanhā Fereshte-and*
24. *Jāhel-hā va Jigūl-hā*
25. *Afsāneh-ye Dehkadeh*
26. *Jāhel-e Mahall*
27. *Dokhtarān Bā Ma 'refat*
28. *Abrām dar Pāris*
29. *Tarāneh-hā-ye Rūstāyi*
30. *Shirmard*
31. *Ghahremān-e Ghahremānān*
32. *Morād o Lāleh*
33. *Shamsi Pahlavūn*
34. *Vel-Mo 'attali*
35. *Istgāh-e Teran*
36. *Fardā-ye Bāshokūh*
37. *Soghāt-e Farang*
38. *Yekkeh Bezan*
39. *Sālār-e Mardān*
40. *Ezdevāj-e Irāni*
41. *Lūti-ye Gharne Bistom*
42. *Mardān-e Rūzegār*
43. *Ghahvehkhāneh-ye Ghanbar*
44. *Qaisar*
45. *Ali Begham*
46. *Toghi*
47. *Raghāseh-ye Shahr*
48. *Morid-e Haq*
49. *Kūcheh Mardhā*
50. *Pahlavān-e Mofrad*
51. *Dāsh Ākol*
52. *Heydar*
53. *Ayyūb*
54. *Kākū*
55. *Se-Tā Jāhel*
56. *Noghreh Dāgh*
57. *Lūti*
58. *Ahmad Chakmeh-yi*
59. *Se Qāp*
60. *Bābā Shamal*
61. *Mard*
62. *Qalandar*
63. *Tanhā Mard-e Mahalleh*
64. *Khānevāde-ye Sarkār-e Ghazanfar*
65. *Mehdi Meshki va Shalvārak-e Dāgh*
66. *Sāhereh*
67. *Za 'ifeh*
68. *Zafar*
69. *Kāfer*
70. *Gozar-e Akbar*
71. *Nānajib*
72. *Āghā-ye Jāhel*
73. *Bājenāgh*
74. *Ghūl*
75. *Tāher*
76. *Mokāfāt*
77. *Maghrebi*
78. *Mardhā va Nāmardhā*
79. *Jonūbi*
80. *Ma 'shuqeh*
81. *Morvārid*
82. *Matars*
83. *Āb Tobeh*
84. *Āghā Mehdi Vāred Mishavad*
85. *Oustā Karim Nokaretim*
86. *Jūfeh Fokoli*
87. *Salāt-e Zohr*
88. *Doctor o Raghāseh*
89. *Dokhtarān-e Balā, Mardān-e Nāqolā*
90. *Pāshneh Talā*
91. *Zabih*
92. *Shāhrag*
93. *Gholām Zangi*
94. *Mojāzāt*
95. *Rafigh*
96. *Ham-Khūn*
97. *Pishkesvat*
98. *Jāhel o Raghāseh*
99. *Ghorūr o Ta 'assob*
100. *Vāledeh Āghā Mostafā*
101. *Valinemat*
102. *Sineh Chāk*
103. *Ashk-e Raghāseh*
104. *Hormat-e Rafigh*
105. *Zan*
106. *Ghol-e Mard*
107. *Faghat Āghā Mehdi Mitūneh*
108. *Faryād-ras*
109. *Hagh o Nāhagh*
110. *Barādar-koshi*