In the region’s socio-political scenario during the late 1950s and the early 1960s, the cultural-political context of Vimochana Samaram exemplified basically two undercurrents: 1.) the disillusionment of various sections of the population with the rationalist discourse that the Left proposed; 2.) the suspicions put forward by the religious minority communities against the Hindu majoritarian interests lurking behind the dominant ideas of secularism and rationality as well as the agendas of nationalization. Moreover, if the emergence of generic tendencies like ‘the women’s cinema’ indicates anything, the social-reformist narratives of caste egalitarianism and class revolution effected through the contract between men of various castes/communities, were not appealing to large sections of women as well. The modern Malayali nation envisaged by the Left was disintegrating into segments.

By the early 1960s, while the operations of Udaya and Merryland studios facilitated a flourishing commercial cinema in Malayalam by making films that addressed the fragmented sections of the audience, by commodifying their subjectivities and gratifying their desires indirectly, the Left-affiliated artists
initiated attempts to mould a middle aesthetics of integration that strove to bring together the seceding audience segments under the overarching structure of nationalist social progress, by deploying martyr narrative. However, this middle aesthetics of integration declined to address, in any significant manner, the basic contestations that were raised against the modernist rationalist discourse envisaged by the Left as the basis of Malayali nationalism. The dominant Left failed to clearly grasp the significance of the dissents that led to the ‘disintegration’ of the Malayali nation, and refused to address many of them as legitimate. As our analysis of some of the films that employed the middle aesthetics of integration suggests, faced with discontents emerging from within the region, the Left did not have any new agendas to propose other than the rhetoric of the need to transcend caste and communal boundaries and unite as subjects of the modern Malayali nation in order to ensure social progress. Besides, the centrality of the Hindu upper caste male in the cultural imagination of the Left did not undergo any significant transformation.

On the other hand, the dissenting forces against the modernist rationalist discourse of the Left too did not have an alternative democratic imaginary to propose, other than reinstating the political structure that existed in the region during the first decades of the Twentieth Century, where various caste and religious communities operated as pressure groups, competing with each other for public resources and political representation, often by building expedient
political alliances with other sections and appealing to the state. The Leftist discourse of modernity and rationality, however, retained a dominant position, its positivism rendering the voices of disillusionment as illegitimate and closing off all possibilities of engaging with them. The choices before the dissenting voices were limited: they could resort to surreptitious ways of indulging in and gratifying their subjectivities and desires, or face existential crisis (inextricably linked to individuation and artistic/ intellectual reflection), until they are able to articulate their dissent in universal registers, matching the grandeur of the modernist, rationalist discourse that it contests and challenges.

It is against this political-cultural backdrop that I discuss Bhargaveenilayam (The Haunted House: A Vincent, 1964) as an endeavor that systematically enunciated the disillusionment with the rationalist vision of the Left that marginalized and delegitimized various aspects of life, like religious faith, fantasy, romance, sensual desires, sentimentality, etc. The film firmly rejected the Left's positivist rationalist discourse as well as the dominant nationalist imagination centred on the Hindu upper caste male figure, and posited a radically different worldview where the energies of faith, fantasy, romance, sentiment, etc. have a legitimate space in the social-cultural imaginary. In the following section, I try to read the film as a conscious attempt to engage with the (popular) domain of ‘irrational’ beliefs, excesses of sentimentality, energies of romance and sensual desires, etc., and mould a radically different worldview out of it, by critiquing and moving
away from the tendencies of commodifying them, and even of constantly indulging in the pursuit of the uncanny and the mysterious.

The directorial debut of A Vincent, Bhargaveenilayam is written by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, combining elements from a number of short stories of his own, but the main thread is developed out of his short story titled Neelavelicham (The Blue Light). The (nameless) protagonist (Madhu) is an aspiring novelist, who comes to stay in a desolate mansion on the outskirts of a beach-side town. He soon learns from his friends and others that the house is haunted by the ghost of a young, beautiful woman named Bhargavi (Vijaya Nirmala), who used to live there and is believed to have committed suicide by jumping into the well in the courtyard of the mansion. All of them try to dissuade him from staying in the house. The novelist, however, tries to befriend the ghost by striking up conversations with her. The ghost makes its presence felt, as the gramophone starts playing on its own and objects move around in the house. Gradually, the novelist gets interested in knowing and writing the real story of Bhargavi.

The novelist begins his story based on the accounts provided by his friends about Bhargavi’s life and the letters that he discovers from a secret box that she had

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1 Bhargaveenilayam is the only film Basheer scripted. His most important works were written between 1943 and 1968. See also Udaya Kumar (1999, 2005) and Ramakrishnan (2011) for discussions on Basheer’s works. Ramakrishnan observes that “Basheer was one of the first Malayalam writers to recognize that the nation-state [...] functioned as a massive impersonal machine which is insensitive to the interests of the people” (2011: 108).
kept. As it turns out, Bhargavi had fallen in love with Sasi Kumar (Prem Nazir), a poet and musician who came to stay in her neighbourhood. Bhargavi is believed to have committed suicide after Sasi Kumar abandoned her and left the place. However, the novelist realizes that his narrative is not accurate, as the ghost intervenes and burns the half-written story. He becomes even more curious. The ghost helps the novelist in his search for clues by providing crucial hints at various points. He finds a newspaper from Bhargavi’s secret box which carried the news about an unidentified man who was found dead on a train. It turns out that the dead body was of Sasi Kumar, who, according to the newspaper report, might have committed suicide out of despair due to love failure. The novelist’s further enquiries reveal that both Bhargavi and Sasi Kumar were killed.

The writer finally unravels the truth: Nanukkuttan alias MN (P J Antony), Bhargavi’s cousin, was in love with Bhargavi and was determined to marry her. Hearing the news about the latter’s love for Sasi Kumar, Nanukkuttan makes plans to bring an end to the romance between Bhargavi and Sasi Kumar. As Bhargavi refuses to marry him, Nanukkuttan poisons Sasi Kumar, who was on his way to Lucknow to learn Hindustani music. He then informs Bhargavi that her lover is no more, in the hope that she would forget about her lover and marry him. A furious Bhargavi attacks Nanukkuttan. In the scuffle that ensues, Nanukkuttan pushes Bhargavi into the well and kills her. He then spreads the news that Bhargavi committed suicide by jumping into the well.
As the novelist reads out his narrative to the ghost, who by then had become quite compassionate towards him, the film shows the life of Bhargavi reconstructed according to the novelist’s account. Nanukkuttan overhears the story and wants to destroy the novelist. The final dual between the novelist and Nanukkuttan shows both of them tumbling into the well. Nanukkuttan falls and dies, but the novelist escapes narrowly, almost miraculously, giving a hint that Bhargavi’s ghost helped him escape. The novelist considers Nanukkuttan’s death as the will of God. In the end, the writer wishes Bhargavi’s ghost a happy reunion with her deceased lover. The loud laughter of Bhargavi’s ghost resounds over the end title.

The first thing that one would notice about the film is its grandeur, almost gaining epic proportions, indicating an aspiration to evolve something radically new out of the resources of ‘horror cinema’ – a genre which still circulates at the margins of the mainstream film industries all over the world, and one that did not emerge even as a prominent marginal genre in the case of Indian cinema till the late 1970s.² The film had a high profile star cast with Prem Nazir, Madhu, Vijaya Nirmala, PJ Antony and Adoor Bhasi playing the lead characters;

² In her study of the Hindi horror films of Ramsay brothers made mostly during the 1980s, Valentina Vitali observes: “In India, horror films are like a glitch in the system: none seems to have been made throughout the history of Indian cinemas except between the late 1970s and the early 1990, when the genre saw a brief moment of glory with the Hindi productions of the Ramsay brothers. […] These films never occupied the centre ground of cinema in India. Like much horror cinema elsewhere, they were cheaply produced films that circulated at the margins of the industry” (Vitali 2011: 77-8).
produced by T K Pareekkutty, it pooled in some of the best talents in the industry – P Bhaskaran as the lyricist and Baburaj as the music composer; it imports elements from a vast range of genres, like horror cinema, the romance drama and the suspense thrillers. It stood apart starkly among the horror films made in India till then, also as a film that, in the words of a later commentator, “confirms the existence of supernatural powers unlike some of the early Indian films in this genre” (‘Old is Gold’, The Hindu, 16 November, 2009).

Making no attempt to explain away the supernatural, the film unambiguously rejects the rationalist notions propagated by the Left as well as the modern nation-state. The discontent with the secularist ideals (that proposes a model of public life where religious belief is relegated to the margins, if not delegitimized, as in the Leftist ideology) is evident as well, as the protagonist evokes God as ‘the supreme power’ in the beginning and at the end of the film, but importantly, by taking meticulous care not to invoke one of a particular religion, as well as by not divulging the religious background of the protagonist. We do not have to

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3 The article says: “Even suspense thrillers of the period, which can also be classified under the ‘ghost story’ group, did not deal with ‘real’ ghosts. For example Hindi films like ‘Bees Saal Baad’ (1962), ‘Woh Kaun Thi’ (1964), ‘Kohra’ (1964) had heroines in disguise as ghosts. But in ‘Bhargavi Nilayam’, the audience, for the first time in Indian cinema, were told about the existence of the supernatural.” (‘Old is Gold’, The Hindu, 16 November, 2009). Vitali also discusses Hindi films like Mahal (Kamal Amrohi, 1949) and Woh Kain Thi? (Raj Khosla, 1964) as films that customarily dealt with notions of the supernatural in a “rationalist and secular manner” (2011: 84).

4 Neelavelicham (‘The Blue Light’), the story on which the main theme of the film is based, begins like this: “This is the story of one of the miraculous incidents of my life. No, let us not call it an incident. Let us rather call it a bubble of miracle. I have tried to pierce it with the needle of scientific logic. But I have not succeeded in bursting it. Perhaps you might. You might even be able to analyse and explain it. I called this a miraculous incident... yes, what else can I call it?”
labour much to establish that the film rejected the hegemonic notions of empiricism. More interesting for our analysis is what it does with the resources and energies of popular genres which were relegated to the margins of the socialist realist cinema.

Significantly, the film begins by firmly positioning itself in the domain of the popular. In the very beginning of the film, as the credits are being rolled, we are shown the abandoned mansion from various angles at night, through a mobile camera. We are asked to register the presence of a terrifying, mysterious entity in the mansion, as we see rays of light emanating from the windows and doors being opened and shut by an invisible force, with the accompaniment of the heightened background score and the loud laughter of a woman. A stranger (who, we later realize, is Nanukkuttan) opens the gates and approaches the mansion. Soon, we get to see the ghost itself – not a deformed non-/human figure, but a woman wearing angelic white clothes and a fierce, accusatory look in her eyes – as it appears in front of the mansion to scare the stranger away. The stranger flees, the background score mellows down, and the scene fades out, as the opening credits come to a close.

Having firmly positioned itself in the domain of the popular in the beginning itself, the film then engages in a maneuvering of the affects circulating in the realm of the popular to evolve a radically new worldview out of it, by distancing
from the attempts to commodify and exhaust such affects. It is by dragging the middle class protagonist into this domain of popular beliefs, and using his subjective viewpoint to explore and derive meanings out of this muddled ground, that the film partly achieves this task. In the first shot after the opening credits, we see the protagonist approaching the mansion with his belongings on rikshaws; on the soundtrack is the music familiar to the audience as typically used when the landscape or the characters in a rural/semi-urban backdrop is introduced in Malayalam cinema. He soon comes across rumours and frightening stories about the mansion, Bhargavi and her ghost. His initial reaction to the rumours that circulate in the town is that of suspicion. However, he does not dismiss them completely, but, being a lonely artist struggling for survival, he decides to befriend the ghost, if one actually exists, through imaginary conversations with it. After spending a night at the mansion alone, he becomes confident that either there is no ghost, or even if there is one, he can negotiate with it,\(^5\) so that the ghost does not trouble him much. The strategy is of peaceful co-existence. However, feeling lonely, and being totally disillusioned with the rationalist worldview as well as with the avenues of indulging in the (commodified) conduits of ‘sensual desires’\(^6\), the novelist finds the story of the

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\(^5\) When his friends tell him that the ghost is that of an educated woman, the protagonist says: “Oh, it is a woman? And an educated one? She will definitely understand me.”

\(^6\) Here, I am invoking the lines from the song ‘Ekanthathayude Aparaatheeram’ in the film – one of the most popular songs of disillusionment from Malayalam cinema, written by P Bhaskaran, composed by Baburaj and sung by Kamukara Purushothaman. The last stanza of the song goes like this: “The bruises of knowledge you bear/ and in the winged senses you float;/ Blinding
ghost more fascinating than the world outside, and withdraws into it. (See also Figure v.1)

Figure v.1: “The bruises of knowledge you bear/ and in the winged senses you float;/ Blinding desires depleted/ you arrive, at the sublime shore of solitude.” Frame-shot from the song, ‘Ekanthathayude Aparatheeram’, conveying the disillusionment with rationalist visions and the solitude of artistic/intellectual introspection. Source: Bhargaveenilayam (A Vincent, 1964).

The protagonist develops a romantic (both in the utopian sense as well as denoting sexual desire) interest in the ghost; and various incidents push him into wanting to know her story. Deploying the textual strategies of a detective story

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desires depleted/ you arrive, at the sublime shore of solitude” (I thank Prabha Zacharias for helping me with the translation).
(i.e., subjective camera, inviting audience identification with the central character in the film, etc.), the film takes us on an exploration into the world of the ghost and her real story. Thus, the enterprise of truth-seeking or even demystification is central to the film, but this is appropriated to offer a new worldview, by subverting the conventional modes of resolving the mysteries within the secular and rationalist notions of cause and effect. In fact, the attempt was to demystify and retrieve the realm of the mysterious, the enigmatic and the incomprehensible so as to reclaim it and deploy it to construct a new vision about life.

Having positioned itself in the domain of the popular and engaging with the affects circulating in it, the film, however, mounts a sharp criticism of the practices of commodifying the desires of the dissenting subjectivities and offering them avenues of surreptitious gratification. For example, the film’s contempt for the popular ‘Christian/ Muslim socials’ comes across explicitly and sharply in the sequences that show Bhargavi’s life, constructed according to the novelist’s narration. Kuthiravattam Pappu (Pappu), the servant at Bhargavi’s house, is also a playwright. One day he describes to Bhargavi the plot of one of his latest plays, titled, “The Heroine Who Absconded with the Villain”. He starts: “The curtain rises. The hero applies soap on his face and gets ready to shave, but he realizes that he is out of blades! The heroine goes out to buy a blade. She, however, does not return even after a long time. The hero goes in search of the
heroine. He reaches the tea shop of Mammoonj. In front of the tea shop, we can see the rikshaw of Ouseph.”

At this moment, Pappu pauses, and asks Bhargavi: “You must have definitely noticed the venthingam7 that Ouseph wears?”

An already uninterested Bhargavi nods.

Pappu continues: “Mammoonj tells the hero that [mimicking the Muslim dialect] ‘the heroine has absconded with the villain’! The hero gets ready to trace the villain on Ouseph’s rikshaw. Mammoonj tells the hero [again mimicking the Muslim dialect] ‘why don’t you have a tea and then go?’”

Pappu pauses again, takes out a full-sleeved blouse (in which Muslim women would typically be shown in the Muslim socials), hums the tune of a Mappila song, and says: “At this moment, wearing this blouse, Mammoonj’s wife will come out and serve the tea!” Pappu stops his story, seeing that Bhargavi is clearly not amused.

On another occasion, Pappu tells Sasi Kumar that his latest play, though yet to be finished, has already been advertised saying that it will show ‘the Muslim blouse’ (which he calls ‘box-office’) and ‘the Christian venthinga’. Pappu adds that he has managed to get hold of a ‘Muslim blouse’ to be used in his play by

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7 Venthinga or venthingam is the Malayalam term for the amulet/talisman, made of thin black thread, that Syrian Christians in Kerala wear traditionally. Showing a character wearing venthingam is a continued practice in Malayalam cinema to mark him/ her as Syrian Christian.
stealing one from a woman who was taking bath in the river; now he is in search of a vethinga!

Using the comic playwright’s character, the film was mounting a sharp criticism of the practice in the commercial ‘Christian/ Muslim socials’ to commodify the desires and anxieties of the minority religious communities in the region, at a time the modernist, rationalist discourse proposed by the dominant Left relegated religious belief to the margins of public life, even while the Hindu interests were smuggled in and accommodated into the dominant ideas of secularism. It alleges that, most often, in the ‘Christian/ Muslim socials’, the plot was just a ruse to highlight and commodify the ethnic markers and the cultural traits associated with particular religious communities, thus appealing to the audiences from these sections of the population by offering covert avenues for gratifying their desires and anxieties.

Besides, the textual strategies in the film indicate an obligation to distance itself from the familiar tropes used in horror films, even while positively positioning itself in the genre. For example, it has an interesting moment when religious iconography – deployed often in the films of this genre to evoke horror – is briefly used, appropriated, and rendered obsolete. This scene also unfolds in the sequence that shows Bhargavi’s life constructed according to the novelist’s account. One night, when Nanukkuttan tries to shoot him, Sasi Kumar runs for
his life. He jumps over a wall and lands in a Christian graveyard (though we, the audience, are not shown it immediately). At first, we see a frightened expression on Sasi Kumar’s face, as if he saw something scary; this is accompanied by the screaming voice of a woman – a typical device to evoke horror in the films of this genre at each moment of anticipation. This is followed by a cut to the graveyard, with the camera slowly panning over the tombs, displaying the crosses on them prominently. We realize that it is (just) a cemetery. The soundtrack mellows down a bit; cut back to Sasi Kumar; we see him taking a relieved breath. We, then, see Sasi Kumar moving into the bushes; we hear him wrestling with someone. Soon, Sasi Kumar comes out of the bushes, as if he just defeated somebody in a tussle in the bushes. Sasi Kumar gets out of the cemetery and runs away. Cut back to the cemetery. The soundtrack is totally silent. As the camera pans the cemetery, we see a buffalo coming out of the bushes crying, but calmly (the soundtrack still remaining quiet), as if to give enough time for the camera to capture it, so as to make it clear that it was just a buffalo that Sasi Kumar encountered in the bushes, not the vehicle of Yama – the God of death in Hindu mythology, etc. The scene fades out quietly. Though there are a number of occasions in the film that evoke horror through suspense and partial visibility, in the above scene, one can identify an extra effort to return back to the scene where the action took place and explain the mystery in a ‘logical’ manner. The familiar trope of religious iconography was temporarily appropriated and rendered
obsolete; the film is clearly not interested in digging up the graveyard and unearthing the familiar ghosts, exhausting the genre’s resources, so to speak.

If this is the case, what was the film trying to do with a marginal genre? In fact, there are compelling evidences in the film to suggest that it laments the depleted and cluttered ground of the popular domain, and strives to retrieve the desirably utopic possibilities of the affects circulating in the domain in order to posit a radically different worldview. The romance between Bhargavi and Sasi Kumar is portrayed as an ideal world of love and passion – so utopian that it is often conceived as unattainable (See Figure iv.9). The whole flashback, showing Bhargavi’s romance with Sasi Kumar – a musician, always wearing white clothes, who moves into her neighbourhood, and who is infused with the star charisma of Prem Nazir’s romantic persona – has the characteristics of a fantasy sequence. Sasi Kumar is Bhargavi’s gandharva, the ideal lover of her dreams. Here, the film is clearly appropriating the popular and marginal generic element of romance, considered in the industry circles as appealing especially to women audiences. The cultural-historical significance of the popularity of films with romance as a major ingredient in Indian cinema from the 1920s has been noted by film scholars. Discussing the popularity of the ‘adventure romance’ films in

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8 Pulp novels, using romance as their selling point (known as painkili novels) and targeting primarily, though not exclusively, women readers, were emerging as popular in Malayalam by the late 1950s. As noted in the beginning of Chapter IV and also in Chapter II, a number of such novels were made into films by the late 1950s and the early 1960s. Padatha Paingili (P Subrahmaniam, 1957), based on Muttathu Varkey’s novel of the same title, is an example. These romance dramas were deemed as inferior to socialist realist cinema/ novel.
India amongst a new generation of proto-middle class young audience between the 1920s and 1940s, Kaushik Bhaumik notes:

[The romance films were] dedicated in the main towards the formation of the romantic couple at the end of the resolution of social tension that held back the fruitful coming together of the sexes. [...] Men and women had to settle scores with residual conservative habits, the siren call of the past, before they could do justice to the adventurous stirrings of the flesh and mind. But for this the social setting had to change as well. Thus was set up a long standing genre of Indian cinema – the formation of the couple was tantamount to the setting up of a new kingdom defined by justice and harmony. An older social order had to be shaken up, social ties loosened and made lyrical and more reciprocal, to allow for sexual adventure. (Bhaumik 2008; emphasis added)

However, as Prasad notes, when the socials emerged as a hold-all genre by the 1950s, romance could be staged “only in an embedded form, under the aegis of a compound authority of a feudal and a modern patriarchy” (1998: 95), signifying the structures of the feudal family monitoring and reining in the seceding tendencies of romance’s energies. The romance ingredient, thus, continued to circulate on the margins of the popular culture in the 1950s. In the case of Malayalam cinema, towards the end of the decade, filmmakers identified the pulp novels as a ready source to adopt from in order to address and capitalize on the desires of a vast population who were disillusioned with the agendas of scientific social modernization – whether that of the nation-state or the socialists
– but who nevertheless, fantasized about radical social changes, especially the
transformation of the forces that repressed the elaborations of the realms of
bodily and emotive desires and experiences.

The romance ingredient, thus, signified the domain of fantasy that carries the
utopian desires of the (domestic) woman (see Figures v.2-v.3) to break out of the
bounds of the familial/traditional authorities (represented by Nanukkuttan and
his claim on her that comes through the accepted matrilineal tradition of cross-
cousin marriage in the Nair community). Bhargavi’s constant immersion in this
fantasy is as much a legitimate mode of envisioning social change as the socialist
realism’s fantasies of egalitarianism and controlled class revolution – only that
the former does not have the positivist faith in the rationalist notions of cause
and effect. Understood in this way, the novelist, and through him, we, the
audience, are invited to explore and retrieve Bhargavi’s subjectivity and the
legitimacy of her fantasies as the longing for a new social-cultural imaginary
where the realms of emotion, love, passion and sexual energies are not only
allowed elaborations, but even become the vantage points from where social
transformation can be fantasized.9 When the dominant Left was proposing

9 Some scholars have suggested that the deployment of ‘romantic love’ as a motif was central to
the social realism of the Left. Analyzing the plays of KPAC, Dilip Menon observes: “While [the
KPAC plays] are in a sense political plays, they are structured around love unfulfilled, thwarted
or betrayed. Why is the question of politics rendered as one of affect? Social stasis, decay and
inequality are captured and represented in the impossibility of love within a space as yet to
become modern” (Menon 2001: 264). This, as far as I can see, is not an accurate representation of
the Left’s cultural interventions which, I would argue, clearly marginalized the ‘affect’ of

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agendas of caste egalitarianism and controlled class revolution through scientific social modernization and the social consensus achieved through the contract between men of different castes and communities, the romance genre proposed a different locus to imagine democracy and a just society, where the realm of passions and emotions – which the Leftist imagination sought to delegitimize by characterizing it as an ‘apolitical’ domain in which women seek pleasures – was imagined as the catalyst of social change.

romance and passion in favour of the agendas of social change based on scientific, rational thinking. The romantic love – mostly between the upper caste male protagonist and the lower caste woman – in the KPAC plays and the socialist realist films of the 1950s and the 1960s were never meant to be consummated in the first place (which the author quoted above has also acknowledged), and were mostly strategies to feminize Dalits/ lower castes, so that they can be represented, or spoken for, by the upper caste male protagonist – thereby effecting the former’s symbolic identification with the latter. Such romance was also deployed as a strategy of declassing/ de-caste-ing the upper caste protagonist. Moreover, the women characters in these films and its romances were not attributed any agency. Thus, romance, a key ingredient of popular culture, was being appropriated for the cultural politics of the Left that privileged rationalist notions of cause and effect. In these films and plays, there is no attempt to envision social change from the locus of the energies unleashed by romance and sexual desire as such, whereas, in a popular social film like Jeevithanowka (K Vembu, 1951; See Chapter I for the plot) or the romance film Padaatha Painkili (P Subrahmaniam, 1957; See Chapter II for the plot), the consummation of romantic love between protagonists from disparate social backgrounds is the end of the narrative, which has to be realized through a restructuring of the existing social order. To my mind, it is important to delineate these differences in order to understand the Left’s social-cultural imagination, as well as the dissenting views against them which were most often expressed and gratified in surreptitious ways in popular culture.

Figure v.4: Just a touch away, yet so unattainably far... The romance between Bhargavi and Sasi Kumar. Source: Bhargaveenilayam (A Vincent, 1964).
Sasi Kumar’s death, then, signifies the depletion and erosion (the inevitable outcomes of commercialization) of the domain of fantasies – the realm of hopes and escape for Bhargavi – as I shall try to demonstrate. After Sasi Kumar leaves the town promising to come back soon, we see Bhargavi noticing from her room that the house where Sasi Kumar used to stay has now been occupied by a group of young, middle class men. The clamors and noises of these young men have come to take the place of Sasi Kumar’s divine music. On the night when Nanukkuttan comes to inform Bhargavi that he has poisoned Sasi Kumar, the conversation between the two is disrupted by the loud laughter and noises coming from the men across the wall, engaged in playing cards. Nanukkuttan’s intentions to kill Bhargavi become clear, as the latter firmly refuses his proposal for marriage. She calls out to her mother for help as Nanukkuttan tries to attack her, but her cries are drowned in the noises coming from the neighbours. She runs towards the wall and tries to climb over it to invite the attention of the young men, who, however, are totally immersed in their game. Nanukkuttan drags her back and pushes her into the well (See Figures v.5-v.8). He also manages to escape from the scene unnoticed, as the whole atmosphere resounds with the loud conversations of the young men. The suggestion is rather clear: the space that (should have) offered utopian hopes has come to be occupied by unruliness and chaos (signified by the collective of young men) and selfish mindless indulgence (indicated by the game of cards). It not only does not help Bhargavi, but also unwittingly assists the assailant escape unnoticed.
Figure v.5: The conversation between Bhargavi and Nanukkuttan gets distracted by the noises coming from the neighbourhood. Figure v.6: The young men immersed in a game of cards. Figure v.7-v.8: Nanukkuttan drags Bhargavi back to him as she attempts to invite the attention of the young men across the wall. Source: Bhargaveenilayam (A Vincent, 1964).

After her death, Bhargavi’s subjectivity and desires are irretrievably lost in the world of rumours and the scandalous tales that circulate in the public/popular domains about her. The story that is, then, impatiently waiting to be told in the desolate mansion on the shores of the sea - away from the familiar landscapes - is of Bhargavi’s subjectivity that fantasized a life of utopian possibilities. The
process of retrieving Bhargavi’s subjectivity and the legitimacy of her desires is precisely the process of the novelist discovering his own subjectivity that desires a worldview outside the rationalist, positivist notions. It is striking, then, to note that one of the first things that the curious novelist encounters, when he opens Bhargavi’s room for the first time, is his own image in the mirror, which scares him for a moment. Moreover, towards the end, when Nanukkuttan threatens to kill the novelist for writing the true story of Bhargavi and implicating him in her murder, the novelist, with an immensely serene expression on his face, hands over the manuscript of the novel to Nanukkuttan, saying the latter is free to destroy it. Unsurprisingly, Nanukkuttan responds saying it is not the novel that he wants to destroy, but “the novelist and his brain”. Thus, retrieving Bhargavi’s subjectivity and the legitimacy of her desires – and in the process, enabling the novelist to realize his own subjectivity and desires – emerges as the end of the narrative, much more than fulfilling Bhargavi’s revenge against Nanukkuttan through the protagonist.

Combining the elements of suspense thrillers with that of the horror cinema, the film subverts the basic impulses of a narrative of truth-seeking, and tries to produce a new affect. If the conventional suspense thrillers resolve a mystery, a crime or the presence of the uncanny by deploying (and thus reiterating) the rationalist, empiricist perspective, in Bhargaveenilayam, though every moment of revelation takes us one step closer to the ‘truth’, the uncanny reiterates itself at
each of these moments as well, urging us to acknowledge its presence. While the film offers all the pleasures of truth-seeking, the meaningfulness of this exercise lays not in reiterating the dominant rationalist, positivist notions by explaining away the mysterious or the fantastic, nor in indulging in the constant pursuit of the uncanny, but in striving to evolve a radically different worldview that envisions legitimate spaces for the excesses and energies of faith, romance, sentiment, fantasy and sensual desires.