Introduction

One of the primary challenges before an academic project on Malayalam cinema is to engage with, make sense of, and move beyond, the ‘exceptional’ status of its object of analysis. Malayalam cinema ‘stands out’ mainly in two ways. We often come across, in contemporary debates and historical narratives, references to even popular cinema in Malayalam as showing a certain propensity to adopt closer-to-life themes, in contrast to Indian popular cinema’s perceived affinity to myth and fantasy-oriented tales. In addition, in the discussions on the distinctive mode of politics in South India, in which cinema and (the regional) language attain crucial importance, Kerala and Malayalam cinema do not seem to fit in easily. There have been important attempts at problematizing this ‘exceptional’ status of Malayalam cinema, which begin by directly asking the question: what does the anomaly indicate? Significantly, a revisiting of the vibrant decade of the 1950s becomes central to all these debates.

This project embarks on a different route of enquiry by provisionally setting aside the qualifications, omissions and silences which mark the field of Malayalam cinema in the contemporary debates, and attempts to construct a historical account about the dominant commercial-aesthetic tendencies that can be identified in cinema in Kerala during and around the decade of the 1950s, and
the political-cultural dynamics that shaped them. In other words, rather than letting the contemporary debates and the conventional histories frame or set the terms of our study, this thesis attempts to situate the analysis firmly within the period under consideration, from where it could try to make sense of the later discussions about Malayalam cinema of the period, as and when we come across them. Of course, there are no possible ways of inventing magical formulas to ‘directly’ access a historical period outside the contemporary debates that surround it and, in many ways, make them accessible to us. However, the intention here is to make an effort at avoiding the risks of looking at a particular period or the interventions of various historical agents through the lens of what is at stake in the contemporary debates – an approach that can often obliterate the political-cultural energies specific to the period and the region. Thus, the historical analysis embarked here is not a search for the genealogy of a particular aesthetic or representational strategy, but an enquiry into cinema in Kerala during and around the vibrant decade of the 1950s animated by different historical agents’ interventions in the medium, and how their specific political-cultural interests worked themselves, directly or indirectly, into the film texts.

As it engages with films coming under a range of genres, the analytical mode in the thesis combines, and often oscillates between, the devices of close textual analysis and historicization. Though the decade of the 1950s and its political-cultural energies emerge as central to the analytical framework, the periodization
overlaps, thus taking up for critical analysis films spanning from Jeevithanowka (The Boat of Life; K Vembu, 1951), a popular social produced by Udaya studio, to Bhargaveenilayam (The Haunted House; A Vincent, 1964), one of the first films that systematically articulated the disillusionment of various sections of the population in the region with the political-cultural vision proposed by the Left which de-legitimized the affects of faith and sentiment. Moving away from the tendencies of analyzing films as screen-reflections of reality, the thesis approaches cinema as a medium that re-presents, and works with, already existing representations of social relations; cinema thus becomes a site of contestations over the representation of social relations which structures our reality. Moreover, the project looks at cinema as an industrial-cultural institution that develops its own resources of materials and signifying practices which can be mobilized, appropriated and redeployed in varying combinations and contexts to conjure up new meanings and affects. Hence, it pays much attention to the significations associated with various genres, the sedimented meanings that the image of an actor/actress carries, as well as the energies that various narrative elements can mobilize directly or indirectly, to construct a historical account of how Malayalam cinema of the 1950s engaged with various commercial, cultural and historical imperatives that animated the region and its film industry during the period.
In a nutshell, the thesis analyses Malayalam cinema of the 1950s as animated by the attempts of the aesthetic of ‘social realism’ – proposed by the Left-affiliated artists and writers – striving to achieve hegemony by proposing a Malayali nation based on rational, secular values, and the oppositional articulations to this dominant aesthetic that found expressions, often in covert and commodified forms, in various marginal genres of films produced by the radically commercial film industry that emerged in Malayalam towards the end of the decade and during the early 1960s. Apart from the available films of the period, I have depended on archival sources – especially magazines, government records, newspaper reports, advertisements – and the memoirs and autobiographies of famous personalities and pioneers of Malayalam cinema, to construct this narrative.

**Indian cinema of the 1950s**

The critical understanding on Indian cinema of the 1950s developed by film studies in India, over the last two decades, serves as a backdrop for the analytical framework adopted in this project to examine and comprehend the narrative, thematic and textual elements deployed in Malayalam cinema during the period across genres, even while being attentive to the socio-historical contexts specific to the region that result in some of the distinct characteristics of the region's cinema of that time. The project, thus, tries to understand Malayalam cinema as a
cultural institution sharing aesthetic and formal features that cinema in India, or even South East Asia in general, has come to acquire, their specificities being closely linked to the nature of the modern democratic imaginary operational in these regions. Scholars of Indian cinema consider the 1950s as a significant period in the cultural history of cinema in the country, and the decade's films as important reference points to identify predominant aesthetic practices, their specificities contrasted with the conventions of Hollywood cinema, and the socio-historical imperatives that define Indian popular cinema's dominant textual form and narrative preoccupations.

Hindi films of this period have been analyzed for, among other things, the loose assemblage of attractions that they were, the centrality it afforded to romance which nevertheless did not have parental sanction, the narrative structure that reasserted the feudal moral imperatives, their indifference to the elements of suspense and surprise, the deployment of family as the model for representing the society and its implications, the conventions that have been carried over to cinema from the local indigenous oral and visual culture traditions, and their melodramatic form which often address the spectators as public rather than as individuals.¹ Informed by the debates in political theory in India that have suggested that communities, rather than individuals, functioned as the political

¹ The works of Rosie Thomas 1985; Ravi Vasudevan 1989, 1993; Ashish Rajadhyaksha 1987, 1993, 2000; and Madhava Prasad 1998, 2011; are some of the important attempts at identifying and analyzing the implications of these aspects. See also Chapter 3 in Vitali 2008.
actors and subjects in India’s history of democratic politics, film scholars have argued that Indian melodrama, especially of the 1950s, addressed its audiences as public rather than individuated, in contrast to Hollywood narrative cinema that ideally addressed the spectators through individuated codes and conventions. The diegetic characters’ occasional look into the camera in Indian popular cinema – thus breaking the codes of realism that produce an individuated spectatorial position – is only one aspect of this. Analyzing Andaz (Mehboob Khan, 1949), Ravi Vasudevan (1993) has persuasively argued that Indian social films and melodramas of the 1950s, even while adopting the conventions of Hollywood continuity cinema – like the eye-line match, point-of-view shot, match-on-action cuts, etc – also deploys other modes of visual representation like tableau shots and iconic frames to situate the spectator’s subjectivity within the space of the social code. He illustrates this by examining a sequence in the film – which otherwise follows the conventions of Hollywood narrative cinema – in which a tableau shot is effectively deployed to allow the censuring gaze of society to bring a halt to an ‘illegitimate’ romance that develops between the heroine and the protagonist. He points out that “the address has an encompassing normative aspect to it which momentarily throws us out of the flow of individual awareness” (Vasudevan 2010: 85-6). In Vasudevan’s words:

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2 See Kaviraj 1995, 1996; Chatterjee 1998; and Veena Das 1996.
If melodrama in Indian popular film constructed a subjectivity at once personalized and public, it also addressed its audiences in crucial ways as public rather than individuated. For, in its methods of representation, its construction and articulation of character types and character expression, and the particular way it tied intimate circumstances, perceptions, and familial ties to a drama beyond the individual, this is a species of melodrama which repeatedly highlights itself not only as an insistently exteriorized but also public way of talking about the human condition. This is observable in crucial, symbolically charged passages of character conversation, where speech moves into a register beyond the interpersonal: its idioms and pitch are designed to invoke a larger discursive frame of reference: moral, normative, even critical and contesting. Not only does the speech and visage pose this as supra-individuated, it also suggests that it is aimed at an audience beyond the one presented within the fiction. (Vasudevan 2010: 43)

The thematic preoccupations usually identified as typical of Hindi cinema have also been analyzed by various scholars to draw insights about their political-historical significance. Discussing the implications of the joint feudal family as a recurring narrative backdrop in the Hindi melodramas between the 1940s and the 1960s, Madhava Prasad (1998) has demonstrated how this aspect is linked to the ways in which the commercial energies and the psychic drives of a modern industrial medium like cinema have been appropriated and contained in the Indian context. The theme in these “feudal family romances” often revolved around a romance that did not have the sanction of the patriarchal elder, very
often the father-figure. "This basic narrative structure, where the unity and jouissance of the feudal family, its control over its accumulated wealth, is threatened by usurpers and modern values [...] could incorporate consumerism and other ‘modern’ features without damage as long as it did not slide into a position of affirmation of new sexual and social relations based on individualism" (Prasad 1998: 67).

In Prasad’s influential formulation, cinema is an industrial medium wedded to certain consumerist aspirations and modern scopic drives. Through feudal family romances, Hindi film industry finds a way to incorporate consumerist aspirations, ‘modern’ desires and aspirations for social transformation, but in such a way as to contain them by restoring the authority of the reformed joint family and the patriarchal elder. Prasad reads this narrative structure as characteristic of the passive revolution in India, in which bourgeois transformation had to work through feudal forms and the new structures of power like the bureaucracy.3 The privileging, in these films, of the feudal order ruled by the patriarchal elder over the state is noteworthy in this context. These narratives often tended “to privilege the moral sphere over the legal”; the speech “is conventional, contrived and excessive”; “the characters are objects of emulation or disapproval rather than identification” (ibid: 69).

3 See Chatterjee 1986, Kaviraj 1988 on the nature of the transition from colonial to post-colonial nation-state in India as well as other post-colonial regions, and on the specific forms that the political structure has taken in India following Independence.
Theories of melodrama in the West become important reference points for Prasad’s formulations. Studies about family melodrama in the West have pointed out the importance of this genre in the context of social transformation. Peter Brooks (1976) has argued that in the nineteenth century, when melodrama emerged as a form, it dealt with anxieties arising out of the social transition from a universe of traditional meaning and hierarchical authorities to modern social structures. For Brooks, melodramatic narratives always attempt to recover the securities of the “pre-modern”, “sacred” universe; the plots depended heavily on personalities; and the family became a crucial site for staging conflicts. Prasad sees affinities between Indian film melodramas with the film melodrama of the west, but argues that the former’s narrative structure is closer to the stage melodrama of early nineteenth-century Europe and America. Drawing on Grimsted’s (1968) study of the latter, he points out that the class structure in these American melodramas remained generally feudal and predominantly populated with kings and peasants, lords and ladies. These narratives of belligerently egalitarian feudalism often told the stories of princes in disguise as a servant, for example. The twists in the plot would cancel out the egalitarian displacement often through a last minute disclosure of the lowly character’s noble birth. These plays could also be read as a mechanism of aristocratic self-legitimization. For Prasad, a similar feudal structure provides the basic framework for a majority of Indian film melodrama between 1940s and 1960s.
Complicating Prasad’s argument that the patriarchal joint family melodramas continued to remain the dominant narrative form in Hindi cinema through the 1950s, Vasudevan (2010: Chapter 1) contends that after Independence a new form of popular investment in the nation-state is palpable in Hindi and other language films, displacing earlier forms of authority. The patriarchal joint family narratives continued to be significant, but as an aspect of the family social film genre. The attempts to imagine a public order superior to the patriarchal family’s authority can be identified in most of the post-Independence social films. In these narratives, “the state, as vehicle for the recognition and amelioration of social victimhood and injustice, emerges as a crucial site of action and recognition.” (ibid: 49-51). Hindi cinema deployed various narrative elements to register this move away from the horizontal, hermetic family register. Vasudevan points out the urban thrillers as one example. In these thrillers, the prominent narrative backdrop shifted to the urban spaces, the city, the street, etc., and the narrative solution in them often highlighted the state as the paramount authority. Another instance is that of Bengali melodramas of the 1950s which surpassed familial-social network of authority by producing a fantasy space for the lead couple. Citing the works of Moinak Biswas (2001), Vasudevan points out that in Bengali melodramas, this involved the production of a privatized fantasy space – a realm of interiority – “where the couple could constitute itself untrammeled by the familial form” (ibid: 52). This space of the couple could often exercise pressure on the repressive co-ordinates of the familial-public nexus.
Talking about yet another recurring narrative format that strives to displace the patriarchal family authority, Vasudevan draws our attention to films in which the nurturing mother held a central, iconic position. In these films (like Awara; Raj Kapoor, 1949), which attempt to institute the middle class hero as the new authority in the social and the familiar spaces, the iconic presence of the mother - stable in her virtue and her place - serves as a moral orientation for her son and also a figuration of the past. Here, the familial space, occupied by the iconic figure of the mother, has a different function other than denoting the patriarchal authority of the father. This (familial) space of the mother often protects the son - the middle class protagonist - from the perils of the social void by binding him back to it. It thus functions as a moral order to fall back on while the shift of authority from the father to the son takes place under the benign agency of the law. The space of the mother gives way to the “nucleated” space over which the middle class hero must exercise authority (ibid: 89-90).

The Southern scenario and the curious case of Kerala

If the critical understandings about the context and the nature of the political transformation from colonialism to the post-colonial nation state in India provide a crucial framework to approach Hindi cinema of the 1950s, the cinema of the period in South Indian languages have received academic attention as sites for understanding the distinct mode of democratic imaginary that operates in these
regions, and its relations to the immense popularity and political power that
some of the film stars enjoy in the southern linguistic states of Andhra Pradesh,
Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. In these regions, the institution of cinema has played
a crucial role in facilitating the ‘imagining’ of linguistic (sub)nationalities. This
peculiar relationship between cinema and the democratic social imaginary
epitomized itself most vividly in the huge fan-adulation enjoyed by a number of
stars from these film industries, often resulting in the latters’ victories in electoral
politics – an aspect that has been studied by many scholars.5

Prasad (1999) identifies a combination of historical conditions – the emergence of
linguistically homogeneous markets for cinema in India with the advent of the
sound film, the end of colonial rule which made visible the void in the place of
patriarchal authority, the advent of electoral politics and the re-organization of

4 Here, I am drawing on Benedict Anderson’s (1983) influential formulation about print
capitalism as one of the fundamental facilitating factors in the emergence of the nationalist
sentiment in the Americas, in Europe and in Russia. He has famously termed nationalities as
‘imagined communities’ – large anonymous socialities formed by the simultaneous experience of,
among other things, reading the daily newspaper. See Srinivas (2010a) for the links between the
film industry’s attempts to consolidate linguistic markets and the evolution of the cultural map of
the “Telugu nation”.

aspects of the film stars’ success in political power structures in South Indian regions. These
accounts mostly explain the phenomena in terms of the manipulative power of cinema as a
medium that nurtures certain star images, thrusts them on the masses and tries to influence their
thinking. See Prasad’s essays (1999, 2009) that argue for an understanding of the mass popularity
and political power of the film stars in South India as arising in the political context of the
emergence of linguistic nationalities in the South Indian regions, that operate as ‘nations’ within
the overarching parameters of the Indian nation-state, and whose political-cultural self-
expression often takes on covert dimensions. Given cinema’s crucial role in facilitating the
linguistic national sentiments in these regions, its mode of address came to acquire political
overtones; the male star came to represent the linguistic nation per se. See Srinivas 1996, 1997,
2009 on the complex nature of the relationship between the spectator and the star, and for
discussions on the obsessive and performative dimensions of fan activities.
the states according to dominant languages, the decline of the film studios and the increasing dependence on star value as a factor in film production, and the ideology of passive revolution which made pedagogic relations between cultural producers and consumers an essential feature of social and cultural life – as the factors that contributed to the emergence of a situation where “cinema […] came to be chosen as the site of a strong political investment, where audiences responded with enthusiasm to an offer of leadership emanating from the screen …” (Prasad 1999: 49). This approach problematizes the dominant ways of understanding star-worship as the result of the ‘false-consciousness’ of gullible spectators. Pointing out the inconsistencies in such accounts, Prasad instead suggests that the “cine-politics” and the structures of star-adulation in these regions are manifestations of the mass audience’s participation in a supplementary, virtual political representation which subsists underneath the parliamentary system.6 Extending this, Prasad has argued in a later essay (2009) that the peculiar forms of fan culture and cine-politics in the three south Indian states constitute part of a cultural politics set in motion by the ideology of popular/subaltern sovereignty, the orders of which could be at odds with the theory of sovereign citizenship. The insights that Prasad’s formulation provides

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6 This formulation, in many ways, anticipates political theorist Partha Chatterjee’s (2004) observation that in India, like in many modern democracies, due to various historical reasons the political domain is marked by an internal structural division between ‘civil society’ and ‘political society’. Chatterjee identifies political society as a domain marked by forms of popular mobilizations that often spill over the rational forms of democratic politics, as opposed to the domain of civil society where political articulations are firmly determined on the premise of the modern citizen.
us about the centrality of the Madras-based industry, between the 1930s and the 1950s, in the history of cinema in the Southern language states are of immediate significance to our project.

Significantly, the star-worshipping cults typical of the other South Indian regions are not visible in Kerala, until at least the late 1990s. In a recent essay, Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2010) has suggested that this need not signify the exemption of the region from the distinctive mode of popular politics operational in South India. He argues that in the case of Kerala, “the ‘popular’ is something that might have to be theorised horizontally – relating cinema and other institutions, like Communist Party, for example – rather than vertically, as a story within the history of cinema” (ibid: 34). The essay invites our attention to the paradoxical nature of the Left’s political mobilization in Kerala, where even as the Communist Party remains firmly committed to the ideals of rationality at the official level, it accommodates and maintains ‘irrational’ domains of leader-adulation, rituals, belief systems, etc., to retain its mass support base. Arguing that the domain of the popular remains discursively erased in Kerala due to the role the Communist Party has played in keeping it intact, he says:

The existence of the Left in Kerala, like the structures of the political in Tamil Nadu (for example), exceeds the limits of the rational political public as it makes itself visible in modern Kerala. An invisible domain of beliefs, irrational structures of knowledge, fandom, rituals and practices remain the central structure within which the politics of rationality is
played out. This allows for the Communist Party to exercise complete hegemony in spheres outside parliamentary politics even when they are not triumphant in the elections. (Ibid: 41)

These formulations about Indian cinema of the 1950s, as well as the specific political dimensions that the South Indian cinema assumed during the period, provide us with certain basic frameworks to situate our object of study in the political-cultural map of the post-colonial nation-state and the context of linguistic nationalism in the South.

**Malayalam film studies: A brief overview**

There have not been many attempts at studying various aspects of cinema in Kerala before the 1950s. The existing scholarship on this area tends to consider the initial filmmaking attempts in Malayalam as moments of rupture beginning to constitute an autonomous field of “Malayalam cinema”. This approach does not give much attention to the parameters of the film business which was already in operation in the region before the local initiatives in filmmaking emerged. The films are often analyzed by looking at the storyline and juxtaposing them with the region’s social-political context of the time so as to draw insights into what

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7 Bindu Menon’s (2005) work on the governmental regulations and the anxieties about the exhibition halls in Travancore during the 1920s and 1930s, and Muralleedharan’s (2005) essay that attempts to identify various socio-historical imperatives specific to the region that determined the early filmmaking attempts in Malayalam, are some of the very few significant attempts that looks at cinema in Kerala before the 1950s. Also see Menon 2009; 2011 for accounts on two failed attempts at making films in Malayalam during the 1940s.
they had to tell about various historical events. Our understanding of the early Malayalam films could change fundamentally once we take into consideration the industrial-cultural contexts within which the film industry operated in the regions that constitute the present Kerala until the late 1940s, which set the terms for the early attempts in commercial filmmaking. These include the structures of the exhibition-distribution sectors – controlled mostly by Tamil capital and depending almost entirely on films made in production centres outside Kerala – and also the wider geographies of production and circulation that the film industry in India, including the production centres in the south, were entangled in during the time.

The cinema of the 1950s also remains largely a black hole, even when a significant number of studies on Malayalam cinema of the later periods revisit the socialist realist cinema of the 1950s, especially those made by P Bhaskaran and Ramu Kariat, as historical texts that set certain aesthetic standards which were much lauded in dominant historical accounts. The academic attention on Malayalam cinema has concentrated mostly on various aspects of the institution after the 1970s, when commercial cinema in Malayalam was exploring numerous modes of engaging with the desires and anxieties circulating at the margins of the dominant social-cultural order, at the formal as well as thematic level. Various studies point towards a palpable shift in the conventions in commercial cinema after the 1970s, as the ‘conventional’ family-centred narratives began
giving way to tales from other locations. The works of S Sanjeev, Jenny Rowena, T Muraleedharan, Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, Navaneetha Mokkil, Bindu Menon and C S Venkiteswaran constitute an important body in the studies on Malayalam cinema after the 1970s.

Rowena’s (2002) influential thesis on Malayalam comedy films, for example, examines the economic-cultural contexts in which comedy emerged as a popular genre by the 1990s in Kerala. These contexts included the breakdown of the celebrated ‘Kerala Model’ of development, the losing currency of family melodrama in cinema and other popular cultural forms, the high rate of employment among women especially from the dominant castes, and the new avenues that the Gulf economy opened up for the marginal communities in the region. Rowena argues that these conditions led to a restructuring of Malayalam cinema’s conventional narrative form, as comedy tracks, which were till then relegated to the margins of the dominant narrative of family romance, began attaining centrality. These popular comedy films, featuring smaller stars, narrated the travails of unsuccessful young men in pursuit of a fortune. The bonding between men (of different castes and communities), their constant anxieties about masculinity, the increased visibility of subaltern men and ‘emancipated’ upper caste women were the most striking features about them. She argues that these films, while affording thematic centrality to the desires and anxieties of subaltern men, offered avenues of “remasculinization”, thus
reproducing the “casteist patriarchy” where the upper caste woman becomes the desirable objects, and effecting a near-total erasure of the lower caste woman and her subjectivity. Her thesis discusses the socio-realist film of the 1950s as important reference points of aesthetic standards in the traditional histories of Malayalam cinema.8

Muralidharan’s (2001) study on the “male-bonding” in Mohanlal’s films during the 1990s places itself in the historical context of the anxieties arising out of the assertions by the lower caste men and the “employed” upper caste women in the public sphere. Even while evoking queer energies, the male-bonding in these films reiterated the superiority of the high caste men over the lower caste men as well as the upper caste women. Sanjeev and Venkiteswaran (2002) have discussed the interventions of the popular actor-writer-director Sreenivasan in Malayalam cinema as the attempts to raise “uneasy” questions against the Left’s secular politics that remained resolutely impervious to questions of caste, by often appropriating and subverting the established conventions in cinema. Even while making himself available as an actor carrying ‘visibly’ subaltern physical attributes who constantly had to play the role of the denigrated, the films he

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8 See also Rowena 2010. Despite the valuable insights that the study provides, Rowena’s analyses of the films of earlier periods are characterized by a tendency to examine them against the same framework that she uses to analyze the comedy films of the late 1980s and the 1990s. Thus, the securing of the structures of “casteist patriarchy” is uncomplicatedly understood as the singular motive that drives the narrative preoccupations in the social realism of the Left during the 1950s, the middle class family dramas of the 1970s and the 1980s, as well as the comedy films of the 1990s.
scripted and directed engaged directly with the unresolved and publically unacknowledged structures of caste. Radhakrishnan’s (2009) study on the relationship between the Gulf economy and Malayalam cinema between the 1970s and the 1990s looks at how Gulf emerged as a significant point of reference for imagining the cultural identify of Kerala during these three decades. He delineates the distinct modes in which the ‘artistic’ cinema and the commercial cinema engaged with the changes that became visible in the economic and social hierarchies within the region in the context of the Gulf migration and remittances.

The period post 1970s has also witnessed attempts to invent and draw new boundaries between “art” and “commercial” cinema, as S Sanjeev (2002) has shown through a discourse analysis of the writings on cinema during this period. These writings by critics tended to construct a hierarchy between “art” and “commercial” films based on the suggestion that the latter exhibited excessive investments in “the body” (i.e., the sexualized female body) while the former would focus on “the soul”. Sanjeev contends that the “middlebrow” cinema of the 1980s showed a progressive tendency to collapse these binaries in many ways. Often, the terms of reception would dramatically change depending on how a particular film has framed the excesses of the female body, as Navaneetha Mokkil (2011) has shown in her analysis of Avalude Ravukal (Her Nights: I V Sasi, 1978), a film that played with these binaries of the body and the soul, resulting in
its circulation in Kerala as both a semi-porn flick and later as an ‘art’ film. Her essay links the public anxieties over the excesses of popular cinema with the moral anxieties within the region around “sexualized” figures like the prostitute.\(^9\) Bindu Menon (2010) has examined how some of the middlebrow films of the 1980s, especially those directed by K G George, engaged with female subjectivity, often in conversation with the “women’s cinema” of the 1950s and the 1960s. Though these formulations do not offer instant frameworks with which to approach Malayalam cinema of the 1950s, they provide us hints about some of the aesthetic conventions that have been carried over from the earlier decades, and the modifications that they have undergone in the subsequent periods. Most importantly, by pointing towards the subjectivities and desires that erupted in Malayalam cinema after the 1970s, these works signal towards the questions and anxieties that were sought to be ideologically resolved, provisionally set aside, or left unaddressed in the films of earlier periods.

Thesis outline

The thesis is divided into five chapters, each trying to historicize the industrial and cultural considerations – not always contingent on the social-historical imperatives specific to the region – that governed various historical agents’

\(^9\) Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2010) has discussed the public anxieties over the popularity of the semi-porn films starring Shakeela over the last decade. He has argued that a certain urge to protect “the family-audience” against the feared moral depreciation that the semi-porn films might cause has emerged as the most perceptible anxiety behind the attempts to regulate the circulation of these films.
engagements with cinema, and the shifting patterns in them across the period, and which reflected on the textual elements they mobilized, appropriated, subverted and at times rendered obsolete. The analysis of the spectatorial subjectivities that the textual and representational strategies in these films produced enables us to map the contestations animating the region’s political-cultural scenario during the period.

Chapter I is an attempt to understand the commercial-cultural pressures within which Udaya and Merryland, the first film studios set up by Malayali entrepreneurs in Kerala, operated during the early 1950s. It also tries to offer an overview of the various stages of the development of the exhibition and distribution sectors in Kerala between the late 1920s and the 1940s, as well as the economic considerations and the cultural anxieties that facilitated the setting up of production centres within Kerala by the late 1940s. Moving beyond the impulses of analyzing the early studio films as ‘regional’ films, the chapter approaches them as products of bricolage which, seeking to address a socially mixed audience, combined a host of generic elements weaved together often along manipulated links within an overarching framework that privileged the impulses of an aesthetic of contemporaneity. This emerged as a convenient format to negotiate with the industrial and aesthetic terms set by South Indian cinema, mainly based in Madras, and the cultural demands placed on it by the socio-historical changes taking place during the 1950s. The case of Jeevithanowka
(K Vembu, 1951) is discussed as an instance where elements from popular mythologicals and stage performances were incorporated, appropriated and subsumed within the compulsions of the aesthetic of contemporaneity that placed much emphasis on the rationalist notions of cause and effect at the formal level and in narrative progression.

Embarking on a close textual analysis of Neelakkuyil (P Bhaskaran & Ramu Kariat, 1954), Chapter II revisits the cultural interventions of the Left in the popular domain, and their specificities. In some ways, the socio-realist films adopted the studio films’ strategy of combining various textual elements, thus shaping a commercial-aesthetic form ula that would address the masses, even while catering to many desires and anxieties of the middle class. The chapter argues that Neelakkuyil combines the elements of the star-cinema typical of the South Indian case, and the aesthetic traits – in its choice of the theme and the representational strategies – that one can identify in the progressive realist cinema in Hindi and Bengali during the late 1940s and the early 1950s. It appropriated the space of the cinema hall, marked by the presence of ‘the masses’, to give shape to an aesthetic of the ‘new popular’ on the one hand, and on the other, to negotiate the (high caste) middle class’s position in the new nation of Malayalees before the mass audience of popular cinema.
The chapter also argues that if the ‘nationalist’ address based on a common language characterized the commercial, star cinema of the 1950s in the other south Indian states, in the case of Kerala, the Left conceived and proposed a discourse of rationality, imagined as emanating from Communism, as the unifying element of Malayali nationalism – an aspect which was to have major implications in the region’s cultural realm towards the end of the decade. The Left’s social imaginary constructed a new moral authority for the region based on secular, rational values perceived as emanating from communist ideals, often marginalizing and delegitimizing the energies of affects and faith. Social realism conceived the realms of rational politics and the relations between communities (mediated by the exchanges and contracts between men) as the only constitutive elements of ‘social reality’; consequently, it marginalized and delegitimized the affects and energies of romance and sentiments, perceived as appealing mainly to women. The chapter ends by proposing that the radically commercial film industry that emerged in Malayalam by the late 1950s, facilitated by the local studios like Udaya and Merryland, commodified and addressed the subjectivity of women in various forms, offering avenues of covert gratification of their desires and anxieties. The films based on the painkili novels of writers like Muttathu Varkey and E J Kanam, commonly perceived as catering mainly to women readers, were to become a major presence in Malayalam cinema by the late 1950s and during the 1960s.
Chapter III examines Newspaper Boy (P Ramadas, 1955) and Raricha Enna Powran (P Bhaskaran, 1956) as the early attempts in Malayalam to mould an artistic practice of cinema, addressing mainly a small middle class audience segment. Discursively constituting the audience as ‘universal humanitarian subjects’, and constantly reiterating the belief in the audience-members’ capabilities to make meaning on his/her own through the recurrent use of suggestive visual codes, were two marked features in these films. Historically, these artistic practices of cinema necessitated evolving new aesthetic registers that would be different from the textual strategies used in the social realism of the Left, even while continuing with its thematic focus on the poor. The chapter argues that the strategies of deploying the urban milieu as the narrative backdrop and using the figure of the child protagonists as a key narrative device allowed these films to focus on, and elaborate the tales of, the poor and the oppressed in ways that suit the gaze of the middle class viewer. The affective energies of melodramatic pathos were blended with the imperatives of realist representational strategies and avant-garde devices like montage in this cinema, to narrate tales of human suffering from the vantage point of the middle class’s anxieties about social transformations in the context of the call for rapid industrialization in the region.

The chapter argues that while there is are strong impulses in Rarichan Enna Powran to reconstruct the urban space using studio sets, Newspaper Boy uses the devices of documenting the city. I argue that these differences in the films’ relation
to the urban space are directly linked to the specific anxieties of the cultural producers regarding industrialization and the social transformation that ensues. Contrasting Rarichan Enna Powran with Nayaru Pidicha Pulivalu (Nair’s Dilemma: P Bhaskaran, 1958), a popular comedy film made by the same team, the chapter tries to point out the Left’s alternating take on industrialization when it addressed the middle class audience, and when it addressed the masses. I argue that these contradictory tendencies in the Left’s take on industrialization as arising out of the complex negotiations that the Left in Kerala had to engage in during the time with the hopes and anxieties of, on the one hand the lower caste/ class majority – who also formed a major support base for the Communist Party in Kerala – and, on the other hand, the traditionally powerful sections as well as the consolidating middle class, in order to maintain its power.

In Chapter IV, I have tried to signal at the disaggregation of the Malayali nation, envisaged by the Left as composed of modern, rational subjects, by the late 1950s, in the context of Vimochana Samaram and other political developments. The commercial film industry in the region, spearheaded by Udaya and Merryland – the two local studios – identified the disaggregated polity, and tried to cater to various dissenting sections of the population by commodifying their desires and subjectivities. I have attempted to argue that the emergence of the small and broadly defined genres in Malayalam cinema by the late 1950s, mainly ‘the women’s cinema’, ‘the Christian/ Muslim socials’, and the films based on
religious myths and folktales like vadakkan pattukal, signify the commercial film industry’s attempt to cater to the desires and anxieties of different segments of the population that began expressing their disillusionment with the model of Malayali nationalism proposed by the Left. These genres tried to cash in on the affects of faith, sentiments and romance, the energies of which were marginalized and delegitimized in the Left’s cultural imagination. The Left-affiliated artists, however, responded to this political-cultural ‘crisis’ by trying to hold together the dissenting audience segments under the rubric of the narratives of nationalist social progress constructed around a central martyr figure. This shift in the narrative structure went along with the attempts to evolve a ‘middle aesthetic’ in cinema, which would incorporate the elements of popular cinema, but subordinate them to the worldviews of the middle class, nationalist spectator subject, through strategies of framing and containment. The chapter examines Mudiyanaya Puthran (The Prodigal Son: Ramu Kariat, 1961) and Puthiya Akasham Puthiya Bhoomi (A New Horizon, A New World: M S Mani, 1962) - two films written by the quintessential Left writer Thoppil Bhasi – as martyr narratives of nationalist integration, proposing the ‘middle aesthetic’ as the ideal. The dissenting voices against the integrationist imperatives in these films were often acknowledged, but were contained for the moment in favour of the preoccupations of nationalist social progress.
Chapter V is an attempt to read Bhargaveenilayam (The Haunted House: A Vincent, 1964), a ghost film written by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, as an attempt to systematically articulate the disillusionment of various sections of the population against the cultural vision proposed by the Left’s social realism. Firmly rejecting the secular vision of the Left that marginalized faith as well as the rationalist notions of cause and effect propagated by social realism, Bhargaveenilayam positioned itself in the domain of the popular, in order to strive to evolve a radically new worldview out of the affects and energies circulating in this domain. Combining the elements of horror cinema and detective stories, the film evokes the pleasures of truth-seeking, but appropriates them to construct a vision of life that, on the one hand resists the rationalist notions of empiricism, and on the other, revivifies and retrieves the energies of faith, sentiment and romance as focal points around which social transformation can be imagined.