# THE SENSE OF VIOLENCE

**Director** Kim Mooyoung

South Korea | 2024
114 min. | Korean, English with English subtitles

**Screenplay** Kim Mooyoung. **Cinematography** Kim Mooyoung. **Editing** Kim Mooyoung. **Music** Matutamtada Worramet. **Sound Design** Kim Mooyoung. **Sound** Kim Mooyoung. **Producer** Kim Mooyoung. **Executive Producer** Kim Mooyoung. **Production company** Void Space (Seoul, Südkorea). **With** Kim Sung-Chil, Jun Mi-kyung, Yun Yong, Choi Ji-won.

**World sales** Void Space

## Synopsis

Kim Mooyoung analyses the visual material in his found footage film with almost scientific precision (newsreel images, architectural images, film images; images of the enemy, images of women, images of the family), exposing traces of memory of the war of images that began during the Korean War and took on new forms under President Park Chung-hee in the 1960s and 70s. Via images and narratives, state-supporting anti-communist ideologies were built from the ground up. In its artistic portrayal, the censors asked for the real violence to be adorned with feelings of sadness and moral superiority, or to disappear completely. Rigorously edited, **THE SENSE OF VIOLENCE** traces propaganda-fuelled hatred and its camouflaging in the archives to write an alternative film history. An off-screen female narrator comments and reflects on the patterns in which violence has been preserved – in which it is hidden. And at some point, not only do insights become tangible, the pain that propaganda has engraved in the hearts and minds of generations does too. A rich and fabulously argued film that searches for memories that ideology has not reproduced. (Christiane Büchner, Barbara Wurm)

**Kim Mooyoung** makes films and engages in research-based media exhibition work. His first feature film, NIGHT LIGHT (2018), was screened in the Vision section at the Busan International Film Festival and won the Passionate Staff Award at the Seoul Independent Film Festival and the Best Cinematography Award at the Wildflower Film Awards Korea. Kim's experimental short documentary GOLD DRAGON MOUNTAIN (2021) was invited to the Seoul Independent Film Festival and the Oberhausen International Short Film Festival.

**Films**: 2013: concrete. 2016: Land Without People. 2017: Day and Night (short film). 2018: Bam Bit / night light. 2021: Hwang Ryong San / Gold Dragon Mountain (short documentary). 2024: The Sense of Violence.

## Director's Statement

### How Ideology Impacts Sensory Experience

**The imprints of violence inscribed on our bodies do not simply vanish**

I have spent nearly a decade exploring how ideology intervenes in sensory percep-tion through various forms of art. One of the most striking instances of this interven-tion was during the 1970s under the Park Chung Hee regime [South Korean presi-dent who seized power with a military coup in 1962 and governed until his assas-sination in 1979, ed.], when the Anti-Communism Law imposed strict control over artistic expression.

Enacted by the Park Chung Hee regime, the Anti-Communism Law served as the foundation for coercive censorship. Under this oppressive regime, artists were compelled to adorn the sheer brutality of violence with the sensations of sorrow and hatred. On the other hand, there were victims of ideology who were silenced, una-ble to expose the pain of violence. They were oppressed by the sensory experi-ence of violence, embellished by anti-communist ideology, and compelled to forget its imprints. However, the sensory imprints of violence inscribed on our bodies do not simply vanish. One day, the pain that violence has engraved on the body inevi-tably resurfaces in strange and unexpected forms.

Kim Mooyoung

## Interview

### "What happened in the past is not history, it lives on in the present"

**Kim Mooyoung speaks to Fabian Tietke and Barbara Wurm about anti-communist ideology in South Korea and the challenges of Korean film history**

*Fabian Tietke: Your film is a critical assessment of anti-communist ideology in South Korea. I have to say I'ver never seen that in a film. How common is it as a perspective on South Korean politics and history?*

Kim Mooyoung: Until democratization, anti-communism was a powerful force. Particularly under military regimes, it served as an effective tool for suppressing opposition forces. Although anti-communism weakened after democratization, the right wing still considers it an important ideology. Therefore, when a right-wing government takes power, anti-communism exerts significant influence. On the other hand, the left has been critical of anti-communism, and during periods of left-wing rule, its influence has declined. But regardless of which party holds power, anti-communism continues to exert influence over people. This is because South Korea's primary adversary is North Korea, and being labeled as a communist implies sympathizing with North Korea. As a result, it is impossible to officially be a communist in South Korea. Anyone who publicly declares themselves a communist would face both legal and social repercussions.

*Barbara Wurm: What does it mean to make a film like yours in this political environment? Do you feel any kind of pressure? Are there topics where you felt you were self-censoring?*

KM: I don't feel any pressure even if the present government in South Korea uses anti-communism as their political strategy. But I don't care about that kind of thing. I just go on. I imagine at some point some anti-communists may attack me, but I just try to forget about it and keep going.

*FT: Your film intertwines an analysis of the past with images from the present. Do you see* SENSE OF VIOLENCE *more as a film about the past or more as a film about the present?*

KM: What happened in the past is not history, it lives on in the present. When I was making this film, the left was in power, and everyone said that anti-communism was a thing of the past. However, now that the right has taken power, anti-communism has influenced various aspects of society, and people have called this film timely. I believed that anti-communism would not end until a formal end-of-war declaration was made with North Korea. The declaration read by the current president while declaring emergency martial law was almost identical to the anti-communist ideology promoted by the Park Chung-hee regime. While I thought anti-communism was still ongoing when making this film, I was shocked to realize just how unchanged it remains.

*FT: In your film you dedicate some time to the history of two massacres from the Korean War. We see these drone images of a search for mass graves and see an excavations of bones. Could you perhaps talk about the importance of these massacres, how are they remembered today?*

KM: The massacre in Yeosu and Suncheon happened in the late 1940s, before the Korean War. The massacre in Daejeon happened in 1950 during the Korean War. Both were forgotten for a very long time. Only the families of those who died wanted to remember these massacres. When the military government ended in 1993, the oppression was less strong, so people tried to remember the forgotten massacres. With the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2005, previously forgotten massacre incidents began to receive official recognition. The Daejeon Golryeonggol incident was also acknowledged through investigations conducted by this Commission, leading to the official excavation of remains. Currently, efforts are underway to create a memorial park. The Yeosu-Suncheon Incident is a significant event for the right wing. Since they have used this incident as a symbol of anti-communism, they refuse to acknowledge it as a massacre. As a result, this massacre has still not been officially recognized as such.

*FT: Are the excavations we see in the film for both massacres?*

KM: No, the excavations are for the Daejon massacre. They were finished last year.

*BW: Do you see your film as part of an approach to process history, part of a broader political movement?*

KM: I hope this film can be of help to the families of the victims in of the Yeosu-Suncheon and Daejeon massacres. I received significant support from researchers representing the victims' families, and Jun Mi-kyung, a family member of a victim of the Daejeon massacre, provided invaluable assistance. Therefore, I hope this film contributes to the official recognition of the Yeosu-Suncheon Incident and the construction of a memorial park for the Daejeon massacre.

*BW: Could you talk about your research, the sources and archives? Where do all the materials come from and who are the groups you mentioned that helped you with the research?*

KM: I did all the research by myself. Other people just helped me clear rights etc. In order to be as historically correct as possible I collaborated with two researchers from Yeosu and from the Daejeon. They are specialists on the two massacres collaborating with the families of the victims of this Daejeon massacre and in charge of the memorial park.

*BW: So* THE SENSE OF VIOLENCE *is basically a one-man-film!*

KM: Yes. I wanted this film to be a personal one—a film that maintains academic accuracy and is created through scientific inquiry while remaining deeply personal. This is also how I define the essay film.

*FT: You also work with Korean film history. Where does the historical film material you use in the film come from? KM: The films are from the historical archive of Korea TV (KTV). They handle images from the 1950s to the 1970s. I researched the footage of newsreels, cultural films, propaganda and educational films on their site. The other films came from the Korean Film Archive, they own them and handle parts of the copyright. I went there and I tried to find films linked to anti-communism.*

*BW: How long did you work on the research?*

KM: Quite long, five or six years.

*FT: How present are these spy movies that you analyze in the film today in South Korea?*

KM: They are basically forgotten. Nobody watches them. I included them because they are important to the history of anti-communism in South Korea. At the time they were made, the government had control over large parts of the film industry. So the people in the film industry had to make these kinds of films, I assume they must have really suffered. At the same time, they also wanted to become part of the power structure of that era. The books on Korean film history that I've read document how filmmakers of the time were highly sensitive to shifts in power. As my film portrays, they were both victims and part of the power structure. As far as I know, Korea is one of the few countries whose film history was not influenced by Neorealism. Those who embraced Neorealism were primarily political activists resisting the Chun Doo-hwan regime in the 1980s and university film clubs. The films they made at that time were the beginning of independent and documentary films.

*BW: Is there research on these films? There is so much happening in South Korea generally in the field of film history research.*

KM: Spy films and anti-communism films were often poorly made and regarded as low-quality movies, so they receive little attention from most film scholars. Historians and cultural studies scholars focusing on censorship and anti-communist ideology do examine these films, though only few studies exist, limited to a few well-known films. Korean film history is challenging to study. Many films from before the 1980s were not preserved and have been lost, and from the 1980s onwards censorship heavily influenced filmmaking, making it difficult for filmmakers to express their worldviews through their films. Therefore, documenting the history of Korean films before the 1990s is quite a challenging task. That's why I expanded my research scope to include historical and cultural studies.

*FT: Is there any reference to films from Korean or global film history that you had in mind while you were working on your film?*

KM: I'm strongly influenced by Harun Farocki. My doctoral degree in fine arts was on the editing method of Harun Farocki. That helped me a lot to make THE SENSE OF VIOLENCE. And when I studied Farocki, and I also studied Artavazd Peleshyan. Farocki

was influenced by Peleshian's editing style. So, I studied these two directors' editing style. Because of Farocki, I'm actually really honored the film will be shown in Berlin.

*BW: You are referring to Peleshyan's distance montage?*

KM: Yes, exactly. I also want to mention Thom Andersen! I learned a lot from him and his films when I was at film school. When I watched LOS ANGELES PLAYS ITSELF [dir. Thom Andersen, 2013, ed.], I thought to myself that one day, I would like to make a film like this. And Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard and many more.

*BW: I'm interested in how you developed the commentary running throughout the film. What was first – the images or the commentary?*

KM: I began making this film with interviews with both victims of anti-communism and anti-communists, in the framework of my solo exhibition. Based on these interviews, I identified various interconnected themes and gathered related images accordingly. At the same time, I read books and studies related to these themes, searching for ideas that resonated with the images I had collected. However, as the volume of images and texts became overwhelming, I first structured the film and then grouped images and texts that corresponded to the key themes within that structure. Using these grouped elements, I wrote a rough narration. As additional research on the images and texts progressed, the structure was revised, and new themes were incorporated. To adapt to these changes, I continuously refined the narration, striving to create a coherent flow throughout the film. In certain parts, I made a conscious effort to use poetic expressions. As I mentioned earlier, I wanted this to be my personal film, so I worked to transform diverse ideas into intimate and personal expressions.

*FT: How did you pick the voice for the commentary? And why did you decide to have it delivered in such a whisper?*

KM: I wanted this whispering voice to create a dream-like state. However, rather than a complete dream, I wanted the voice to invite the audience into the film as if they were dreaming while awake. I wanted to critically engage with the „voice of God" narration commonly used in documentaries. At the beginning of the film, I used a narration that sounds almost like an incantation, in order to critique the dominant, authoritative nature of a film's voice. However, I did not want to completely erase the cinematic experience that the film's voice creates. I sought to maintain an in-between state. At the end, as the voice becomes completely separated from the image, the essential characteristic of the film's voice is revealed—just like waking up from a dream. Through this process, I hoped that the audience, would also critique my film, just as I critique images within this film. Yet, I wanted them to do so after fully experiencing the sensory aspects of the cinematic language. A dream while awake.

*BW: Is that why you chose a female voice?*

KM: Yes, I wanted there to be a gap between me as a male director and the film. Plus, male voices are still a lot more common, and I wanted the commentary to have a different approach. I believed that the issue of the film's voice was deeply connected to the representation of images and the violence of power. The way a film's voice immerses the audience and conveys the director's thoughts, the way an image producer represents a subject to fit their own intentions, and the way power dominates people through violence – whether physical or social – seemed to share a fundamental similarity. This led me to think deeply about how to use the film's voice. I felt that this oppressive structure was rooted in masculine power, and I needed a way to dismantle it. To do so, I chose to use a female voice and softened its tone, aiming to create a space where anyone could enter and engage with the voice. My goal was to make the film's voice as open and inviting as possible. However, discussing the use of such voices requires caution. I, too, have benefited from this masculine power to some extent. Therefore, in order to create an alternative film voice, I have tried to distance myself from it as much as possible, even if imperfectly.

*FT:* THE SENSE OF VIOLENCE *combines a lot of different materials, newsreels, fiction films, architecture, the story of the guy that went into the embassy in East Germany, and also the footage of the excavations. Did you know that you wanted all that to be in the movie or did things emerge in the process?*

KM: Actually, this project started when I was at university in the USA. I tried to do an art project with a Mexican American artist, Diego Robles. I started to work with him and he showed me the border between Mexico and the US. When I saw the border for the first time, I was really shocked because compared to the border between South and North Korea that border is quite simple. People can look at each other and it is just some barrier. In Korea, the border is a really dangerous place and comprises quite a large area, the Demilitarized Zone is almost four kilometers wide. You can't just see people in North Korea across the border. I was really shocked by the difference. Then I started to research North Korean websites. In South Korea, the government blocks North Korean websites. And if some people do research websites from North Korea and publish about it in South Korea they get punished by the National Security Law. So I was kind of a scared about that, even if I knew, that nobody knew that I went on North Korean websites. I became really curious about this feeling. Why was I scared about this kind of thing?

*FT: So how did you go from that feeling to the project that became* THE SENSE OF VIOLENCE*?*

KM: I did a solo exhibition about anti-communism. I started with the guy who went into the North Korean embassy in the GDR and was accused in a spy case. Then I did more research on anti-communism in South Korea and found a Youtuber, Yun Yong, with 5 million subscribers, who published some really strong footage, which is in the film. After my solo exhibition, I explored cultural studies research on anti-communist ideology and anti-communist policies, which led me to understand the relationship between "anti-communist citizenship" and the Korean War. The term „anti-communist citizen" refers to a healthy adult male who has completed military service. The horrific emotions associated with witnessing death during the Korean War were redirected into anger toward North Korea, and the soldiers who were expected to fight against North Korea became the embodiment of this anti-communist citizenship. Based on this concept, I began searching for cultural traces within film imagery. I continued working on short films and art projects. What ultimately led me to assemble these fragments into this film was the Sewol Ferry disaster in 2014. This tragedy, in which 299 people lost their lives, was broadcast live by major media outlets. Many of these broadcasters distorted the coverage, and even after the incident, the deceased were politically exploited through manipulative representation. Having studied the historical relationship between representation and power, I wanted to reconsider the problems of contemporary representation. Since this is a personal film, I chose to begin and end it with images of the Sewol Ferry disaster.

*FT: Your background is in art?*

KM: I graduated from CalArts. Various artists study at that film school, some do installations, some experimental films. I learned from them that it is possible to work in various art forms.

*BW:* THE SENSE OF VIOLENCE *starts as an archival film, a footage film and becomes an analysis of Korean film history in an (at least for us) unexpected way. Regarding the format, is it similar or quite different to other Korean films of that kind?*

KM: I think it is quite different from other films. I have screened it in two Korean film festivals, both of them found my film unconventional. They told me it's a strange film and kind of a new approach to documentary. Korean documentaries often see film as a form of activism. So they are very clear in their message and their ideology. But my film is not like that. Korean archive films, on the other hand, tend to simply show what happened in the past without much of a subjective comment. The narration in these films describes historical facts or political purposes. But my film has a rather strong subjective commentary, I think. There are very few personal films that investigate history using academic and scientific methods. As far as I know, compilation films that use images from Korean cinema are extremely rare. In this sense, I believe this film occupies a unique position within the landscape of Korean documentary filmmaking.

*FT: Thank you. It was really interesting to learn so much more about your wonderful film.*