



# Mustang

**Director:** Deniz Gamze Ergüven  
**Country:** Turkey  
**Date:** 2015

A review by Jordan Hoffman for *The Guardian*:

“Selma is a one of a kind.” While the statement is true, the sentiment is a lie. Moments before, the handwringing great aunt and co-warden to five “troubling” Turkish sisters was just about to marry off the eldest, Sonia. When Sonia revolted and threatened to scream before both assembled families, she was quickly swapped out for daughter number two. The five girls live in a sizeable, well-furnished home “a thousand kilometres from Istanbul,” but a century from any notion of women’s rights. With their parents dead, they are raised by their grandmother, an aunt and a temperamental uncle whose main concern in life is the state of the girls’ hymens.



“If they are sullied it is your fault!” he shouts at the increasingly panicked grandmother. An opening sequence, a wholly innocent bit of splashing around with boys at the beach, begins a fusillade of arranged marriages, soldered window bars and unplugged telephones. Any clothing other than formless brown gowns (“the colour of shit”) are verboten when men are around. “Our house became a wife factory,” the youngest, Lale (Gunes Sensoy), describes via voiceover.

With spirited Lale as our eyes and ears, we are spared some of the indignities of her older sisters. These include trips to (male) doctors for virginity inspections and, it is later revealed, midnight visits from their barbaric uncle. This later point is slowly revealed to us, and to Lale – at first he’s just the jerk who won’t let her watch football matches, but as the film progresses, the stakes are raised to levels of life and death.

While the subject matter is enraging, the film is not without warmth and occasional levity. The cloaks the girls must wear are quickly tossed when they are alone. Breasts and buttocks in rainbow-coloured underwear are a recurring motif meant not to titillate but as bursts of naturalism. Caged indoors, the girls maintain a close physicality to defend against boredom, light pouring in as they rumble about on some fabulous Oriental carpets.

For one of the sisters, the newly enforced scenario isn’t too bad. She ends up marrying her beau, with whom she’s been having a daring physical relationship. Her half of the double-wedding is upbeat, even if her sister’s is a dour affair concluding in a humiliating inspection for blood on her marital sheets. The fates of the other three sisters are more extreme, and lead to some surprises.

One could easily graft something of a political message about Turkey’s increasing trend away from secularism in this film. However, there isn’t much that’s specific to Islam. The frustrations are as universal as *Splendor in the Grass*, and this isn’t a finger-pointer like, say, Jafar Panahi’s *The Circle*. Director Deniz Gamze Ergüven’s vibe (accentuated



by a Warren Ellis score) may put audiences in mind of *The Virgin Suicides*; hardly a bad comparison for a first-time director. And one can't say enough good things about Sensoy, who can look like a scrappy ragamuffin one moment or a sharp young woman the next, all depending on the lighting or the part in her hair.



While Ergüven must be commended for her light touch with some of the more tragic sequences, she and co-writer Alice Winocour have a few opportunities for a snip. Some of the voiceover narration has a tendency to describe exactly what it is we're seeing, and while some of the third act's action(ish) scenes are thrilling, there are one or two contrivances that don't quite feel realistic. Nevertheless, *Mustang* is a gripping film, and one that ought to stir up a bit of controversy in Turkey. It's worth noting that this is a French production.

From: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/19/mustang-review-the-virgin-suicides-in-istanbul-is-a-turkish-delight>