

# Viewing Notes for *Mustang* (2015)

## Directed and co-written by Deniz Gamze Ergüven (Turkey/France)

“When you look at the world through the eyes of women, cinema is an extremely powerful meta-language. We can say things through film we can’t say any other way – exchange experiences and points of view, and generate compassion, empathy, knowledge and perspective.”

~ Deniz Gamze Ergüven

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### The sisters, oldest to youngest: Sonay, Selma, Ece, Nur, Lale

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#### **Background**

Ergüven is fairly new to the international film scene, and *Mustang* is her first full-length feature. In 2011 she was invited to attend the Cannes Film Festival workshop for new filmmakers, where she met fellow director Alice Winocour, who was there to develop her first feature film *Augustine* (2012). The two hit it off and collaborated on writing *Mustang*. Since its release and success in 2015, Ergüven has released her feature *Kings* (2017) and guest-directed episodes of several television series, including Hulu’s adaptation of the Margaret Atwood novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

Ergüven left Turkey as a teen and has lived in France ever since. She considers herself “Turkish first, then French.” Her connection to Turkish culture has remained strong, as has her critique of the way that culture treats women and girls. She has been an outspoken critic of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his bolstering of a sexist culture: “He makes them [women] fragile with his messages, whether subliminal or explicit. There is a certain way, he says, of being a woman: you have to be a mother and at home, and that’s all. When you see a man, you should blush and look down. It’s like something from the middle ages. The subtext is that women are only seen as sexual. [ . . . ] This is dangerous because it generates more violence against them, it makes it OK for men to act like assailants. Rapes happen everywhere, but in Turkey women come out on to the streets to protest because such attacks only seem to echo what the government is saying.”

The plot of *Mustang*, while seemingly far-fetched and a bit fairytale-like (think Rapunzel), is based on some of her own experience and stories she has heard from her cousins who remained in Turkey. She describes the circumstances of each situation as coming from real-life, but the girls’ actions as responses to those situations as fictional.

Filmed on location in and around Inebolu, Turkey, a village on the northern coast, on the Black Sea. Ergüven worked to keep the set off the radar of local authorities. Conservative leaders in Turkey were highly critical of the film after it became an international hit. In an interview, the director said that France’s decision to ‘adopt’ *Mustang* as its national submission for the 2015 Oscars has been “a touching expression of France’s intention to embrace diversity.

Awards: won six European film awards (including the Césaire and Goya) and was a finalist for several international awards, BAFTA and Oscars.

#### **Looking**

**HAIR:** Note the many ways in which the girls’ hair is used symbolically, whether unkempt, braided for modesty, or being cut. The film’s title implies that the spirit of these girls, like that of a wild horse, can

never be entirely tamed. Their hair plays visually into this idea, and, despite the influence of the older conservative women in the story, the girls' hair is only ever covered when wearing wedding veils.

**BEAUTY AND THE BODY:** Part of the “danger” presented by the very existence of these girls is their striking beauty. This raises important questions about the extent to which societal expectations are projected onto girls in ways they cannot imagine. The blocking and camera work emphasize their natural beauty in a way that shows both their innocence and comfort with their own bodies and the way their community sees them as nothing *but* beautiful bodies awaiting trouble. Critic Maureen Medved notes how they are filmed “as entangled like a garden of wild roses—to the point where they strike awe at the glory of the natural world, each beauty a tinier replication of the next.” Note how their bodies are represented collectively in the early part of the film, almost one unit, and increasingly individualized as the story progresses. By the end, we’re almost entirely focused on the youngest, Lale, the camera often closely framing just her face.

**BARS and WALLS:** the visual motif of bars increases throughout the story, to emphasize the girls’ literal and figurative confinement. Note how the tracking of the action toward the climax gets more tightly framed and darker—almost hard to follow—which mimics the closing-in of their lives. These contrast the openness and brightness of the film’s earliest scenes, when the kids are playing in the wide horizon of the seashore.

**THE ROAD:** There are many long shots out of windows or across the landscape that center on a winding road leading away from the house. This road, along with the idea of vehicular travel, takes on increasing importance as the story advances.

### **Listening**

The soundtrack, in some ways, is dominated by the girls’ voices, which guides the musical soundtrack mood instead of the other way around. Their screams of joy and play, their shouts of frustration, are the real soundtrack. Because they are in a kind of cultural isolation, there is very little “outside” influence in the form of music, such as the pop songs we might expect to hear on a teenagers’ radio.

### **Thinking**

Critic Joe Morgenstern calls *Mustang* “A sneaky shocker of a debut feature—sneaky because it’s so good at depicting the sisters’ joyousness before, and even after, darkness descends.” Where do you see threads of joy woven throughout the story?

Critic Maureen Medved notes how the girls are represented collectively in their freedom, but individuated as the external pressure of societal expectations bears down upon them. While some of them share similar personality traits, each has her own reactions to the circumstances, representing the range of possible responses for girls within such social limits.

The character of the grandmother serves as a reminder of the role *women* often play in maintaining oppressive patriarchal attitudes about women, girls, and sexuality. She is not an entirely unsympathetic character, though, so consider how her characterization walks a kind of tight-rope of compassion and conformity.

A lot about this film can make us feel outraged. Others have been offended. The director says, “even people who hate the film . . . even they, for an hour and a half, have seen the world through Lale’s eyes. That is quite a leap. Just that exercise is such a little revolution . . .”. What do you think?