

Unsentimental journey

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [September 7, 2004](#) issue

Seventeen-year-old Maria is a pretty Colombian girl frustrated with life in her small town. She has a monotonous job at a rose plantation; family responsibilities that eat up her paycheck; and a boyfriend who is content drinking with the guys and working as a mechanic.

Maria is not content. She wants more out of life. Her frustration grows stronger when she discovers she is pregnant. When her boyfriend half-heartedly promises to marry her, the proud Maria quickly refuses. When she meets a slick charmer on a motorcycle who suggests an easy way to make a lot of cash quickly, Maria is ready to listen.

She's offered the chance to smuggle drugs to the U.S. The assignment: swallow large pellets of the drug (tightly wrapped and sealed), fly to the U.S., and wait for the pellets to pass through her digestive system so the drugs can be recovered. Then she can get paid.

Once Maria accepts the job, the Spanish-language film *Maria Full of Grace* shifts from being a sociological study to being a detailed docudrama, revealing the ins-and-outs of this popular method of drug trafficking. It also becomes a crime adventure, with the viewer waiting to see if Maria will get caught or, worse, die should one of the pellets break open inside her.

Maria Full of Grace is the first feature by Joshua Marston, a graduate of the New York University film school who spent years researching the drug world in New York and Colombia. (The film's South American scenes were actually shot in Ecuador.) His writing is specific and his direction precise as he forces us to decide how we feel about Maria and her choices.

To his credit, Marston resists the temptation (endemic to Hollywood) to present Maria simply as a victim we can root for. Instead, she is shown as a headstrong young woman who wants more opportunity for her baby and family, but most of all, for herself. She is not ill. She is not destitute. She could survive without breaking the

law, perhaps by finding a better job in Bogotá. She chooses instead to be a drug-smuggling “mule.”

This realistic approach creates a morally complex film. Given that drug dealing is bad and the drugs themselves can kill, it’s fascinating—and a bit disturbing—to consider how the film leads us to overlook this truth and focus instead on the suspense surrounding the crime itself. This is especially true during the dangerous trip to the U.S. Marston exhibits a flair for shooting within a confined space (the airplane cabin) to suggest the second thoughts the terrified mules—all on the same plane—are having. This tension carries through to the interrogation scenes, where we root for Maria to get past the drug checks and into New York to unload the drugs.

Why are our sympathies with Maria and not with the government agents? Is it because we supply the idea that she is the victim of a greater evil, a corrupt Colombian government in cahoots with the powerful drug lords, and so she should do what she can to grab a piece of the pie? Do we have in mind the general global situation, in which it seems apparent that the have-nots must sometimes play dirty to get anywhere in life? Or are we simply captivated by the lovely, intense Catalina Sandino Moreno, who gives a moving and convincing portrayal of Maria?

Let’s not forget the always-potent “struggle of the immigrant” story. There remains, at least in cinema, something affecting about a character pursuing the dream of a better life in America—even if that dream is based on an illegal substance.

The title of the film suggests that Maria is carrying more than drugs across the border. If being full of grace means being in God’s favor, then we not only expect Maria to succeed in starting a new life in the U.S., we demand it. The ritualistic swallowing of the pellets and the long journey of the pregnant Maria give further religious resonance to her activity—though, again, in a disturbing way.

Maria is an accomplished debut film that wrestles skillfully with issues of right and wrong even as it wrings out tears and scares us silly.