Maria Full of Grace. Dir. Joshua Marston. Perf. Catalina Sandino Moreno. Yenny Paoloa Vega, Giulied Lopez. 2004. HBO, 2005. DVD.

Written and directed by Joshua Marston, the provocatively titled film, *Maria Full of Grace,* suggests an unlikely bond between two young women: the Virgin Mary and Maria Alvarez (Catalina Sandino Moreno), a pregnant, Colombian teenager traveling to New York as a drug mule. Released in 2004, much of what has already been said about the film has focused on the drug trade, exploitative economic systems, and vulnerable young women. Little, however, has been said about the significance of Marston's juxtaposition of these two female figures. Nonetheless, the question of what a venerated religious figure could possibly have in common with a drug smuggler is an interesting one; and, as such, it serves as a worthwhile starting point for this film review.

Rather than offer an in-depth exploration of the Roman Catholic doctrine of grace or the religious symbolism of the roses that appear throughout the film, I would prefer to use this approach as an opportunity to stimulate thinking about the ways that films about female characters often deny them the agency to advance their own stories. And this is where I think Marston's titular reference to the Virgin Mary comes in. Like *Maria Full of Grace,* the Annunciation narrative in which the phrase "Hail Mary, full of grace" appears is focused on the observations, thoughts, feelings, concerns, and decisions of its female protagonist when she is presented with a risky offer: to become the Mother of God. While the nature and gravity of the decisions the Virgin Mary and Maria make may differ, Marston's allusion to their comparability invites viewers to pay attention to Maria's inner life.

Maria's story begins in a Colombian flower plantation where she begrudgingly removes the thorns from long-stemmed roses in order to support her family. It is not long before Maria becomes fed up with her overbearing boss, grasping relatives and lazy boyfriend, quits her job and sets out for the city in search of better employment. Along the way, Franklin (John Alex Toro), a charming young recruiter, presents Maria with a too-good-to-be-true opportunity to make fast—and relatively easy—money smuggling drug-filled pellets into the United States. Since this offer is made shortly after Maria learns she is pregnant, this exchange is key to

establishing Maria's complexity as a female character and it carves out the time and space for viewers to share her experience of the conditions that might cause someone to become a drug mule. As in the aforementioned Annunciation narrative, a messenger informs Maria of a potential future and she weighs the offer carefully before making her decision. The camera lingers on Maria's face just long enough to allow viewers to witness her internal struggle as she considers the moral dilemmas and occupational hazards of drug smuggling.

To help seal the deal, Franklin takes Maria to see Javier (Jaime Osorio Gómez), the soft-spoken, grandfatherly drug-trafficking boss who gives Maria a "no strings attached" cash advance to clear up any financial troubles. After arranging her passage, Javier supervises Maria's ingestion of sixty-two drug pellets and lays out the rules of their relationship: if she fails to produce the correct number of carefully-weighed pellets, her family will suffer. So, even if she wanted to back out of their agreement, Maria has reached the point of no return.

En route to New York, Maria recognizes familiar faces: her best friend Blanca (Yenny Paola Vega) and Lucy (Giulied Lopez), the experienced smuggler who taught Maria how to swallow drug pellets by practicing with grapes. She learns that a fourth woman has been added to their flight to increase their chances of making it through customs undetected. However, what happens next on the flight is a case study in probabilities for the mules: Maria must re-ingest her excreted pellets and suspects a fellow smuggler is succumbing to the effects of a ruptured pellet. When their flight finally lands, Maria is interrogated by customs officials about the cost of her plane ticket, her destination, and the origins of her traveling money. Unable to answer these questions satisfactorily, Maria must submit to an X-ray examination. When the officials discover she is pregnant and cannot be x-rayed, Maria is released while the fourth smuggler is taken into police custody. The traffickers escort Maria, Blanca, and Lucy to a motel where they wait until the pellets are excreted. The pacing of this sequence betrays the double-edged nature of passing time: once the pellets are produced the mules will presumably receive their money and be released, however, it could also prove fatal to one of the drug mules if a swallowed pellet has ruptured. Here, the camerawork emphasizes the significance of Maria's observations and concerns, and we see that the traffickers, like the drug mules, are each playing a role shaped by circumstance. A grisly discovery

reveals that the odds are not in the mules' favor, and Maria makes an unexpected but important decision that reinforces her portrayal as an icon of ingenuity: she takes her pellets and escapes.

Filmed in Spanish and inspired by the social realist films of Ken Loach, *Maria Full of Grace* humanizes drug trafficking without shying away from or glamorizing its grim realities. Crucially, Maria is never portrayed as a victim of her circumstances; rather, she is depicted as a woman who is actively engaged in the process of her own transformation. As Maria's character develops, we learn more about her strength and vulnerability, and become aligned with her perspective despite the reprehensibility of her involvement in the illegal drug trade. Like the female protagonist of the Annunciation narrative, Maria is pregnant with life-changing possibilities. And as we bear witness to the ways that her experience of herself and the world around her informs her choices we are able to say definitively that Maria is indeed full of grace.

Desirée de Jesus
Concordia University