



THE SACRED SPIRIT

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CAST

Nacho Fernández José Manuel

Llum Arquez Verónica

Joanna Valverde Charo

Rocío Ibáñez Carmina

José Ángel Asensio Julio

Ainara Paredes Andrea

CREW

Written & Directed by **Chema García Ibarra**

Produced by **Leire Apellaniz, Miguel Molina,**

Marina Perales Marhuenda, Xavier Rocher and **Enes Erbay**

Cinematographer **Ion De Sosa**

Editor **Ana Pfaff**

Production Designer **Leonor Díaz**



MAXIMAL ESCAPE: CHEMA GARCÍA IBARRA'S *THE SACRED SPIRIT*

by Shelagh Rowan-Legg

As José Manuel and his friends, a small group who believe they're about to be taken away by aliens to a new plane of existence, enjoy their presumed last meal together, one of them, Raúl, reflects that most UFO sightings happen in the wee hours on a Wednesday. Perhaps because it is midweek; perhaps because, for people like Raúl, José Manuel, and their friends, each day simply means another day to try and survive as the working class in a world that has less and less use for them. Perhaps it's the time of the week when that darkness of despondency weighs most heavily on those who have less chance of escape, for whom, indeed, the prospect of rescue by beings from another world seems far more likely than anything in their lives improving. Or maybe it's the perfect time to look in the night sky and dream.

Perhaps this is too cynical an outlook on *The Sacred Spirit*, Chema García Ibarra's first feature-length film, that asks us to find the darkness, but also the light, in a small community in Spain, where a kidnapped child, a dead real estate agent, and a strike by garment workers create a complex crossroads of this comedic yet sobering tale.

García Ibarra finds comedy in emotionally unsettling material. In an interview with Andrew Chan, he noted that "dark comedy has become ingrained in Spanish culture because it's a way of confronting and combating tragedy." No doubt for a country that in recent years has seen its economy almost decimated, a staggeringly high unemployment rate (especially among the young), as well as the destruction of the environment that threatens all life, a sense of humor would be a necessity to keep oneself sane.

As Jay Weissberg writes in a review of the film, García Ibarra is "fascinated by

the ways science fiction and the paranormal burrow inside people looking for meaning in an anarchic world.” *The Sacred Spirit* is a natural successor to a group of short films that each in turn explore similar themes and characters in and around the filmmaker’s hometown of Elche. Just southwest of Alicante (an area familiar to tourists looking for a beach vacation), Elche is known for a few things: it is the center of shoemaking in Spain, it’s a UNESCO World Heritage site due to its fabulous Palm Grove, and it’s where the Lady of Elche bust was discovered, which has often been supposed to be either a witch or an alien.

Perhaps only someone who is from Elche, and who teaches an ‘anti-filmmaking’ class at Madrid’s prestigious film school ECAM, could tell stories that combine all of these elements. In his breakout short *The Attack of the Robots from Nebula-5* (2008), a young man tries to explain that robots will very soon attack Earth, and he’s the only one who will survive; he despairs of losing his family, but no one else in the world which has not treated him very well. With its black-and-white photography, homemade costumes, non-professional actors and deceptive, complex narration, it sets the stage for García Ibarra’s work: the dreams of ordinary people which must, by necessity, reach the ‘maximal idea of escape’.

His next short, *Protoparticles* (2013), begins with a typical Spanish sight: a person taking their garbage to the communal bin, sometime in the middle of the night. Except the person is wearing a homemade, makeshift spacesuit. Again, it’s the tale of someone who feels apart from the world, transformed by science, who must exist both together and apart from those around him, bearing “the sorrow of knowing the biggest secret in the universe and not having anyone who can understand it.” *Mystery* from 2013 and *The Disco Shines* from 2016 both expand on similar thematic material, and drop clues as to what would be found in *The Sacred Spirit*. *Mystery* feels much more somber than García Ibarra’s previous shorts; this time a woman centers the narrative, and we watch as she cleans homes and works at a sewing factory; we hear the call of the upholsterer in the streets, we see the planetary map on her living room wall. She has a husband and son for whom she cares; but she hears the Virgin Mary whispering to her, and decides it’s time for her to find another plane of existence. In *The Disco Shines*, we see the eye looming over the rocks, one woman wearing a leotard with images of the sphinx, another with stars on her face like the constellations. Young people waiting





for something to happen, in a place where, since nothing happens, they can only dream of the most extraordinary things: again, the escape to as far away as the stars, if escape on earth is beyond their grasp.

Uranes, García Ibarra's mid-length feature from 2014, takes all these elements to a deeper and longer tale. With the signature voice-over narration, home-video style aesthetic, mysterious disappearances, the desire to leave for extraordinary places, and waiting aliens, as one of the characters said, we are asked to (proverbially or literally) "dance as if you had something poisonous in your body." That is to say, the story of this strange boy with strange powers asks us to think about how we move in our world, what might have built up inside us, fed to us through centuries of tragedy, to which the only solution is to dance it away.

García Ibarra's films do not fit neatly into any particular category. His work stands out from other Spanish directors working in either social realism or fantastic genre films. Eschewing the easily categorized, he works from the world in which he was raised, and the films he loved as a kid. It has been labelled 'domestic sci-fi', the closest we can come to an accurate term to describe the filmmaker's vision and story that he wants to share. As he said in an interview in *Variety*: "I like this idea very much: go to your grandmother's home, look for an old photo album, open it in a random page and pick one random photo: now imagine that image as a frame of a sci-fi movie."

We can see the film as a drama, relating to the kidnapping of young Vanessa and the impact it has on her family and community. Her mother Charo must still look after her other daughter Vero, she must still work to keep a roof over their heads, without (as she rightly points out) the means to constantly pursue the case herself. Her brother José Manuel tries to help as he can, between running a local bar and looking after their mother, who was once a renowned town psychic before being afflicted by a stroke, which rendered her silent. This is paralleled by the strike by garment workers, mainly women, like Charo, who work from home with little protection and insufficient pay. These scenes of a community working together for their rights are contrasted against others of seeming indifference, such as a parade being watched by no one, or several men giving one man instructions with a difficult task. But just then, a woman puts up a sign for a community event, 'Living

Together as Neighbors': even as the harsh southeastern sun beats down on the working class, they find a way to show solidarity.

But as he notes, García Ibarra frames this realism with science fiction. No doubt groups like the Ovni-Levante Association of Ufology exist around the world, and it's something far closer to the science fiction that most of us experience in our daily lives – that of our hopes, dreams, and nightmares of what might lie in the stars. And it ties in directly with the commentary on the socioeconomic status of the characters and their environment – what hope do they have of improving their situations, when all avenues are blocked to them? Why should they not believe that something out there might hold for them a better world, a better life, where they are valued? This genre of lo-fi sci-fi focuses on the story and less on the mechanics and effects of the sci-fi. Films such as *Coherence* (2013), *Another Earth* (2011), and *Safety Not Guaranteed* (2012), give focus to the characters and how they maneuver a world that often carries them to the unknown without warning, or perhaps in the case of *The Sacred Spirit*, leaves them behind.

The film hints at something dark in an early shot: the sign of the real estate office where the group's soon-to-be-deceased leader works, is defaced with graffiti which reads "scamming poor families". Likely the writer of this was referring to their business practices, and not the much darker secret within. The truth about the UFO group as a front for child trafficking crashes down on José Manuel and his friends. No blame is placed on them for their ignorance, perhaps except José Manuel, who, as the end credits suggest, will shortly pay a price for his part in his niece's kidnapping, even if he was unaware of the reality of the situation. The combination of a SWAT team going into an apartment building, partially blocked by an inflatable sphinx, harkens back to García Ibarra's observation of Spanish dark comedy, where the tragic is given a light touch.

Another way *The Sacred Spirit* keeps a foot in the real and in science fiction, is by filming on location, and with the use of non-professional actors. In an interview, García Ibarra has stated that he feels something like a documentary filmmaker making fiction films. He wants to use real spaces, and real people, that he has known and understood, and only those real people can express his themes, since they are the ones at the heart of these experiences. While on the surface this

might seem to lend the tone of dry wit, the camera always looks on its characters, such as José Manuel, Charo, and the other people of Elche, with affection and understanding. Non-professional actors can, by necessity, force a filmmaker to strip the story to its core. To not burden them with having to ‘act’, either in portrayal of emotion, or perhaps with dialogue more complex than the average conversation. This also allows for a very detailed and local social and cultural context. This is not Madrid or Barcelona, cities known to tourists and cinephiles alike; as journalist Alfonso Rivera noted, Elche is a place that hasn’t “been perverted by the presence of a camera.” These non-professional actors stumble over their words, interrupt each other, make mistakes, sometimes switch topics almost mid-sentence – this kind of *cinéma-verité*, usually reserved for documentaries or experimental cinema (both big influences on García Ibarra), makes us feel like perhaps we are overhearing a conversation on a terraza over a morning coffee, or at the bar with a beer in hand on a weekday afternoon.

So, you can, indeed, run into a walking group as you’re looking for a place to dispose of damning evidence, or enjoy a Spanish-language cover of The Cranberries song ‘Zombie’ as you take your niece on a carnival ride, on what you assume is the last night of the world. Or indeed, even perhaps set up a bouncy Sphinx for a community event as the police charge into a neighbor’s apartment, and the naturalism of the performers, and the location that is a little different than what we normally see of Spain in cinema, make the story feel both familiar and inventive.

The Sacred Spirit is the culmination of much of García Ibarra’s earlier work in short film, and an expansion of it. The themes of community, working class dreams and burdens intertwine with the act of looking to the stars for hope and guidance. The characters long for escape, even as they find connection on the earth. The eyes of the Sphinx are everywhere, the aliens are calling to them, but there are still sandwiches and carnival rides to enjoy together.

Shelagh Rowan-Legg is a writer, filmmaker and academic. She is a programmer for FrightFest and Wench Film Festival, and the Executive Director of The Miskatonic Institute of Horror Studies. Her award-winning short films have screened at festivals around the world, and her book The Spanish Fantastic: Contemporary Filmmaking in Horror, Fantasy and Sci-Fi is currently available from Bloomsbury.





IN SEARCH OF THE SACRED SPIRIT

by Pablo Vergel

Ufology, the occult and the paranormal are an accepted part of contemporary pop culture. Movies, TV series, books and comics are all filled with alien, parapsychological or supernatural plots and characters that fuel today's entertainment, resonating with consumers worldwide. More often than not – and especially in movies – these stories are genre iterations that deal with people's belief and interest in the paranormal and extraordinary in terms of spectacle and pyrotechnics, where special effects play a central role.

Approaching *The Sacred Spirit* – or any of Chema García Ibarra's films – with these expectations would be a mistake. Yes, you will find mysterious entities, seers, close encounters and puzzling conspiracies, but not in the way you would expect in your average multiplex. His focus is somewhere else. When someone watches a UFO in the dead of night, Ibarra is not interested in the shape of the aircraft, nor in the extra-terrestrial beings that could be piloting it or where they come from. He is interested in the person who watches the UFO, in their amazement and the impact of such an extraordinary event in their set of beliefs. In that sense, Ibarra is honest and straightforward with the title of the film. This movie is not really about flying saucers, alien beings of parallel dimensions in a generic sense, it's about something else, something as old as mankind.

The Sacred Spirit revolves around a group of people that have something in common. They belong to an amateur UFO research group called Ovni-Levante in the city of Elche, Spain. All members have pretty dull jobs such as running a bar or selling property, but once a week they meet after work in a murky real estate agency and, following a hierarchical structure and a set of bureaucratic procedures, together they try to unravel the mysteries of the universe. This esoteric society is led by charismatic Julio Exposito, a contactee who claims to have been in outer space. Indeed, the most valued relic that this group treasures is the polo shirt that Julio Exposito himself wore when he was abducted years ago.

Ufology is one of the main topics of *The Sacred Spirit* and when we say “ufology” we don’t mean UFOs or flying saucers, we mean the fringe researchers and enthusiast believers who dedicate a huge amount of energy and resources to pursue the idea that we are not alone in the universe and that there must be something else, that this world, this vale of tears, cannot be all there is. It would be easy to look at these people in a disdainful or ironic way that fixates exclusively on their extravagances, but that’s not the path taken here.

Ibarra’s approach to this motley crew can be regarded as anthropological. As remarked before, in a way he does something cinematically unique. He refuses to shine the spotlight on the many wonders that the ufological imagination could deliver us and focuses instead on the person behind the telescope or the binoculars on a cold night in the middle of the fields looking for answers in the dark skies.

As the plot unfolds, we learn, in an almost ethnographic way, how this particular group of people conduct their everyday lives and their apparently bland routines. Ordinary people but with extraordinary beliefs, they are convinced that the world is being visited by extra-terrestrials; that not only have these extra-terrestrials been among us forever, they are actually our creators. The purpose for our seemingly mundane protagonists is to reveal the truth which is being covered up and threatened by hidden forces, to share that truth with the chosen and transcend the immediate everyday life. Essentially what any other religion or creed has been trying to do since the dawn of time.

In this sense, it’s important to highlight a book called *Entre ufólogos, creyentes y contactados* (Among ufologists, believers and contactees) published by Ignacio Cabria García in 1993. García is a Spanish anthropologist, captivated by the UFO phenomenon since he was a child. He spent a lot of time in his youth following the exciting initiation rituals [??] of UFO research. He was a die-hard believer in the extra-terrestrial hypothesis and was convinced that alien spacecrafts were visiting the Earth. After years of fruitless research, he started to reconsider his enthusiasm and applied his anthropological lens/skills to the field of ufology. His privileged position of first-hand experience, combined with a more academic point of view, brought him to very interesting conclusions, which I am sure resonated



deeply with Ibarra, an avid reader of García's work. He discovered that most, if not all, of the main ideas and assumptions behind ufology were wrong and baseless, but at the same time that those beliefs were extremely important to these people and were central to their personal philosophies and understanding of our place in the cosmos. UFOs could be seen as a joke for some, but to many they were something very relevant/fundamental to the way they conceive their lives. (We will get back to this because I believe this is the hardcore thesis of the movie.)

It's an unusual and commendable aspect of *The Sacred Spirit* that the film is so invested in genuine ufology and paranormal research. Most science fiction movies trade in the clichéd iconography that surrounds the UFO phenomenon: grey aliens with almond-shaped eyes, abductions in the night, secret agents dressed in black and wonderful shiny spacecrafts. They are a staple in contemporary mainstream culture. Ibarra's approach is quite unique. For anybody that is familiar with these topics, it is very obvious that the approach of the director is not casual or superficial. The ideas of researchers such as John Keel, Jacques Vallée or Erich von Däniken are present throughout the whole movie. When one of the characters says that he used to drive alone by night on lonely roads in the hope of encouraging an alien encounter, he's actually quoting the 1975 book *The Mothman Prophecies* by John Keel where he remarks on the so-called "Wednesday phenomena". Keel wrote, "I had collected some 700 UFO reports from 1966 and discovered that the greatest number of sightings, 20 percent, took place on Wednesdays." This is just one example of many that exemplifies Ibarra's refined eye for detail. He could have easily settled for far less and gotten by without invoking a series of references that only a minority of UFO buffs would spot. But it seems that the director knows at heart, and cares, about the reality of his subject and characters. That the full impact of the movie lies in the cumulative truth of the details.

So far, we have been discussing the UFO phenomenon in very universal terms but the way ufology is displayed in the movie cannot be extricated from a very particular sociocultural local context. In this case, the city of Elche in Alicante, South-East Spain.

Modern ufology is considered to begin in 1947 in the USA after the sighting by civil pilot Kenneth Arnold in the state of Washington made headlines across the

country. Very soon the whole nation was talking about the imminence of an alien contact. From the USA, gradually but steadily, this idea spread all around the world becoming one of the most important post-Second World War myths. The emergence and world-wide acceptance of the idea of extra-terrestrials among us can be explained sociologically through the works of figures such as Carl Gustav Jung, Michel Monnerie and Bertrand Méheust who explained that a combination of the decadence of traditional religions and the anxieties generated by the nuclear explosions at the end of World War II created a context where people started to look to the skies with longing, wishfully seeking a kind of heavenly intervention in the form of techno spiritual beings who will rescue us from the risks and danger of nuclear obliteration. In this sense, the belief in extra-terrestrials is a kind of updated and emerging contemporary folklore that sums up the most human of basic yearnings: That we are not alone and there is some sort of life after death.

This was the original template, the need, that helped ufology become an idea of global scope and huge acceptance. The rumors of flying saucers in the skies and aliens manifesting themselves gained credibility all around the world. But different cultures would generate very particular syncretism where the idea of extra-terrestrials would merge with their own sociocultural beliefs and specific relationship with the paranormal. Spain, for example, would become one of the countries where this alien idea would ignite with particular intensity, generating a subculture of its own and displaying phenomena such as UMMO. During the 60s and 70s, several esoteric and alien contactee groups started to receive lengthy letters from supposed aliens from planet UMMO containing revelations and pseudoscientific information, generating a huge excitement. Consensus today is that it was nothing but an elaborate hoax but again, no one involved in it seemed to care. They just wanted to believe.

Chema García Ibarra's cinema has a very particular relationship with its own surroundings. All his films are shot in his hometown of Elche and its immediate *hinterland*, and the weight of local culture and customs is always present. Some have labelled his approach as *costumbrist*¹, but I would rather suggest that he simply wants to share his honest impression of the reality that surrounds him. In this context, it only seems natural that Ibarra would portray how modern universal concepts such as ufology melds with a particular sociocultural context.

I find it fascinating the way *The Sacred Spirit* but also the short film *Mystery* offer us a unique alloy in which the extra-terrestrial idea is amalgamated with local magical practices and creeds. The Levante area in Spain is a region with a long-standing tradition of faith-healers, medicine women (“curanderos”), seers (“videntes”) or Marian apparitions. In a classic book published in 1992 titled *Medicina popular y espiritismo* (Popular medicine and spiritism), scholar María de la Concepción Reviriego Almohalla made anthropological research in the Vinalopo Valley in Alicante. Through this low area runs the river Vinalopo which actually crosses the city of Elche. In this valley there are a number of mid-sized cities such as Villena, Elda and Novelda. Almohalla interviewed dozens of “curanderos” and “videntes” as well as the people that requested their services. It’s amazing to see how at the end of the 20th century you can find people who refuse official medicine in favor of some practices that seem rationally questionable, but on the other hand provide some comfort against our own mortality and allow a connection with something bigger than ourselves.

Particularly in *The Sacred Spirit*, as the plot unfolds, we witness how regular people integrate a relatively modern idea that comes from the USA such as aliens and flying saucers with women that are haunted by visions, religious artifacts and people with supernatural healing powers in a kind of holistic vision of reality that has a deep significance for the protagonists. This is also displayed through many different vignettes during the film with the constant feature of cults, neo evangelist YouTube videos, self-help propaganda, ancient aliens pyramidology, messianic UFO paperbacks, eccentric paranormal magazines, esoteric merchandising, new age music or traditional Christian iconography. All these many elements are interwoven in a mesmerizing tapestry that serves as a fascinating background to the lives and events we see onscreen. This particular

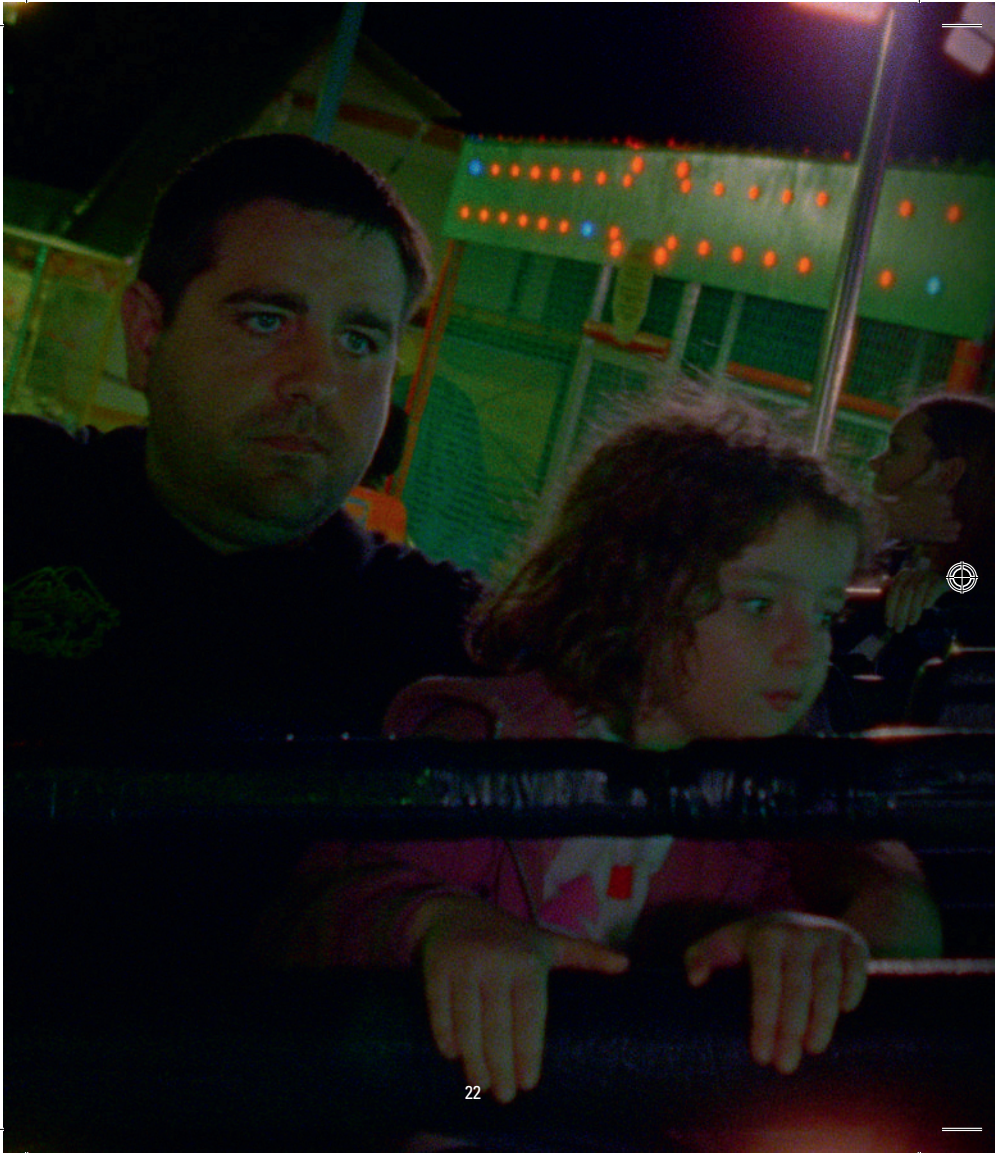
¹ “**Costumbrismo** (sometimes anglicized as **Costumbrism**, with the adjectival form **Costumbrist**) is the literary or pictorial interpretation of local everyday life, mannerisms, and customs, primarily in the Hispanic scene, and particularly in the 19th century. *Costumbrismo* is related both to artistic realism and to Romanticism, sharing the Romantic interest in expression as against simple representation and the romantic *and* realist focus on precise representation of particular times and places, rather than of humanity in the abstract. It is often satiric and even moralizing, but unlike mainstream realism does not usually offer or even imply any particular analysis of the society it depicts. When not satiric, its approach to quaint folkloric detail often has a romanticizing aspect.” Quoted from Wikipedia.

allure must be credited to Leonor Díaz, art director, who did a fantastic job creating unique settings and props.

The Sacred Spirit could be regarded as a movie about a particular place and time, a “costumbrist” portrait of some outcasts in an unremarkable western city at the beginning of the 21st century. Or it could also be seen as a gloomy movie about UFOs and conspiracies. But from my point of view the first feature film of Chema García Ibarra is – in essence – an exuberant gnostic chant in search of the universal and the eternal, in the search of a somehow “sacred spirit”. Rejoice.

Pablo Vergel is a lecturer in Sociology at University of Alicante, Spain. He has written extensively about ufology from a psychosocial perspective, is a regular guest on podcasts, radio and television programs about the subject, and also runs Redediciones Anómalas, a Spanish publishing house specializing in Fortean and paranormal issues.





ABOUT THE TRANSFER

The Sacred Spirit is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.78:1 with 5.1 DTS-HD Master Audio sound. The High-Definition master was supplied by Heretic.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Neil Snowdon**

Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer **James White**

Technical Assistant **James Pearcey**

Disc Production Manager **Beatriz Alcalá**

QC **Aiden Doyle**

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