Lesser-known Hammer horrors

X THE UNKNOWN (Hammer, 1956; US release in '57 by Warners); Directed by Leslie Norman; Produced by Anthony Hinds; Story and screenplay by Jimmy Sangster; Camera, Gerald Gibbs; Music, James Bernard; 78 mins.

With: Dean Jagger (Dr. Rynstone); Edward Chapman (Elliott); Leo McKern (McGill); Anthony Newley (Private Spider Webb); Jameson Clark (Jack Harding); William Lucas (Peter Elliott); Peter Hammond (Lieut. Bannerman); Marianne Brauns (Zena); Ian MacNaughton (Haggis); Michael Ripper (Sgt. Grimsdike); John Harvey (Major Cartwright); Edward Judd (Soldier)

In the mid-50's, Hammer, coasting on the success of their 1955 "The Quatermass Experiment", a film that would take them out of their long-held role as an interesting independent and set them on the road to being a lesser major, were still sticking to science-fiction thrills and spinoffs (and ultimately sequels) from the Quatermass film. Within a couple of years they'd launch their increasingly bloody onslaught into the Frankenstein-Dracula-Mummy remakes. But for the time being the censors were still skittish about violence, and abstract monsters were easier to get past the censors than lecherous and murderous ones.

To a degree, "X The Unknown" suffers from being a poor relation to Quatermass, and in Dean Jagger it had an even duller scientist-hero than Brian Donlevy.

Its slime-mass monster isn't terribly menacing, and the economy of the miniature work and special effects makes it even less so. Yet these restraints do result in more conviction and a better script. Its lack of gore is doubtless responsible for its lack of reputation and its sparse exhibition today, but it's quite an intelligent little film, and a most enjoyable one, holding and suspenseful despite the lack of spectacular effects and multiple shocks that such a subject would be given today.

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

PARANOIAC (Hammer, 1963; US release by Universal); Directed by Freddie Francis; Screenplay, Jimmy Sangster; Produced by Anthony Hinds; Camera, Arthur Grant; Music, Elizabeth Latyens; 80 mins.

With Janette Scott (Eleanor Ashby); Oliver Reed (Simon Ashby); Lillienne Brousse (Francoise); Sheila Burrell (Harriet); Maurice "enham (John Kosset); Alexander Davion (Tony Ashby); John Bonney (Keith Kosset); John Stuart (Williams); Colin Tapley (Victor); Harold Lang (RAF type); Sydney Bromley (Tramp); Jack Taylor (Sailor); Marianne Stone, Laurie Leigh (women).

By the early 60's, and despite the frowns of the British censors, Hammer had surpassed the quantity (though not the quality) of the Universal horror films of the 30's, virtually mass producing them in stronger versions for overseas markets. In many ways, "Paranoiac" is one of their most interesting efforts, despite a variety of influences. Hoping to keep its horror-fans happy, it provides the usual shocks, some of them very effectively edited and presented; also wanting to keep up with the times, it is clearly influenced by the psychological horrors (and even specific scenes) of Hitchcock's "Psycho"; and its well above average story may owe more to the inspiration of Josephine Tey than routine writer Jimmy Sangster; it was claimed, often in tones of outrage, that apart from its introduction of horror, it was a virtual steal from one of Miss Tey's novels! Interesting and full of surprises because it never really tips its hand as to what direction it's going in, "Paranoiac" contains both mystery and horror, and its black-and-white photography (and its convincingly English rather than unconvincingly European setting) make it a genuine British Gothic. If it doesn't reach the highest standards of Hammer's horrors ("The Devil Rides Out", "Kiss of the Vampire") then it's not too far behind. Janette Scott, the only really sympathetic character in the film, made this as the second of a trio of horror-sci films (the others: "Day of the Triffids", "The Old Dark House") made in a row in 1962/3, and takes it seriously enough to give a really good and often moving performance. Incidentally, both films received the "X" - strictly adults only - certificate in England at the time, though censorship has been much more relaxed in recent years. ———— William K. Everson

Program ends: 10.15 approx., followed by discussion session.