

in fact, was written by *Time* magazine's film critic, Jay Cocks (who also has a walk-on in the film).

Recently many directors have tried to revive old genres. In *What's Up Doc?* Peter Bogdanovich remakes a screwball comedy. He essentially plays it straight, tampering with the genre format as little as possible. Although *What's Up Doc?* is very funny, we do feel somewhat ill at ease laughing at such a patently reactionary conception (as if we were stirred to our bones by hearing Spiro Agnew read the Gettysburg address). In *Gumshoe* (also being screened at Filmex), director Stephen Frears plays the private eye genre the other way—constantly telling us that he knows this is all a bunch of old-fashioned tough-guy malarky. The trouble is that Frears is winking at us with *both* eyes—he never gives us any of the kick that old-fashioned malarky could give. *Sisters*, however, lets on that it knows the genre is contrived and corny, and gives us a hell of a scare just the same.

Sisters is DePalma's first non-comedy, and he may have finally found his true forte. His previous films were funny but lacked completeness and balance—they were the Chinese dinners that left you hungry after leaving the theater. In *Sisters* his comic timing is sure and experienced, he knows just when to relieve the pressure, when to get the laugh and how to get it. By injecting his wry humor into Guignol DePalma makes it grand again. He's walking a tightrope and I hope he stays on it.

Paul Schrader

unsuccessful large-budget, mass-audience 35mm films (*Get to Know Your Rabbit*), has broken free with a brilliant, wry and scary film called *Sisters*, which concerns the escapades and capture of a psychopathic schizophrenic ex-Siamese twin, coolly played by Margot Kidder. All of Miss Kidder isn't psychopathic, just the half which is appropriated by the spirit of her ex-Siamese sister at the most inopportune times. Sound Guignol? Before he's through, DePalma runs through the gamut of the hoariest of horror conventions: there's a beautiful young journalist (Jennifer Salt) who uncovers the murderess, there's a Dark Old House, an Innocent Beau, a Mad Doctor, an Incredible Cop and a Girl with a Secret Past.

DePalma pulls it off because he plays his *Psycho*-drama both ways: he lets you know he knows the hoary conventions he is using, but then turns around and makes them work anyway. "TV has used up all the plots. Viewers know them all by heart," DePalma said in a recent interview. "A director can't do the old Alfred Hitchcock formula any more—not even Hitchcock can."

Yet the new movie audience still wants to get thrilled in the old way—they just need a director to let them in through a new door. DePalma finds the new door through the use of irony, satire and parody. With uncanny, adroit timing DePalma will unveil an old Guignol element, push it to its credibility point, then relax and slip in an element of self-effacing humor, then turn around again and squeeze every possible scare and shock from the Guignol element.

DePalma seasons his film with self-parody, continually drawing it back from the brink of cliché. He begins the film with a take-off on a TV quiz show called Peeping Tom—"Now what does the Peeper do, panelists?" Later there's an Honest Joe private investigator, not too suave but diligent, a graduate of the Brooklyn School of Criminal Investigation (shades of Allen Garfield in *Greetings* here). Jennifer Salt's screen mother (played by her real life mother) adds another incisive comic touch. ("Are you taking diet pills again?" she says to her daughter as she tries to track down the murderess.) Perhaps most wry of all is a mock-*Times* video documentary on the history of Siamese twins—a scene which,



Sisters

WHEN YOU LEAST EXPECT it department: Brian DePalma, a young American filmmaker who seemed condemned to the syndrome of successful low-budget 16mm films (*Greetings*, *Hi Mom!*) but