

## Some Disturbingly Funny Films

Prof Wes Gehring writes about a category that bewilders, offends and entertains its audience.

By Marc Ransford, '83, MA '07

Wes Gehring is fond of dark comedy, a genre that has viewers riveted in horror and breaking out in laughter in the same scene.

"The basic premise is that life is absurd, and it's the only genre that doesn't necessarily want to please," said Gehring, a film professor and monthly USA TODAY Magazine associate media editor and columnist. "Dark comedies are based on the notion that our lives are driven by fear, and we make life much worse than any hell there might be."

His 34th book, "Genre-Busting Dark Comedies of the 1970s: Twelve American Films," released in March, examines movies that are as grim as they are hilarious. He analyzes how "All That Jazz" (1979) upended musicals by focusing on a dying man who imagines life as a big show.

Gehring called "M.A.S.H." (1970) one of the best anti-war movies, with director Robert Altman melding bloody day-to-day life of combat surgeons with insanely funny ways soldiers cope with death. "Little Big Man" (1970) transformed the Western by making Native American characters likable and the cavalry brutal.

"Much like today, the '70s was polarizing, and its dark movies were a dividing line. People loved or hated them. Most critics simply didn't understand them because these movies skewered a lot of genres or they thought the movies were simply in bad taste."

### The influence of 'Huck Finn'

To write about dark comedy of the 1970s, Gehring reread several of his favorite novels that were adapted for the screen during that era, including "M.A.S.H.," "Little Big Man" and "Being There." But the inherent absurdity of man is buried in his favorite, "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," which is an ongoing reference for his new book and his life. The classic had a huge influence on him growing up in the 1960s. "Huck Finn wanted to free his slave friend, Jim, but it's against the law and against his religion because the Bible said keeping a slave was OK. He says, 'All right, then, I'll go to hell,' and helps his friend.

"That had a big impact on me because I believe you live by a certain code of ethics. I believe that you do the right thing because it's the right thing." ■



Photo by Michael Hickey

### Wes D. Gehring

**Position:** Professor of telecommunications; joined Ball State in 1978

**Education:** Bachelor's, 1973; master's, 1974; PhD, 1977, all from University of Iowa

**Specialization:** Film, American humor, criticism, writing

**Concept of his work:** "I am a teacher and a scholar. Each role complements the other. Research and publication keep me on top of my specialties and enthused about my work."

**Four favorite books:** "All Quiet on the Western Front" by Erich Maria Remarque; "My Autobiography" by Charles Chaplin; "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" by Mark Twain; "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" by Twain

