

David Thorburn Address at Henry Jenkins' Farewell Forum, April 22, 2010

I deeply regret not being there for this tribute to Henry and for this celebration of CMS.

I'm still having difficulty imagining an MIT without Henry Jenkins. From the moment the Literature Faculty set a precedent by hiring this unconventional media scholar with degrees in journalism and film, I felt we were on course to boldly go where no English Department had gone before.

Henry's achievements over two decades at MIT as the visionary founding director of CMS and as a media scholar more than confirmed this expectation, of course. But his immense contributions to the Institute were not limited to these stellar accomplishments. I think I will most treasure in memory – and most deeply miss – two other Henrys: the charismatic teacher whose classrooms were fiery, exhilarating places of intellectual discovery; and Housemaster Henry, who in partnership with his gifted (and long-suffering) Cynthia, led Senior House so generously and intelligently -- despite continuing abject performances at wrestling competitions during the annual Steer Roast.

Thinking across the range of Henry's writing and teaching is a daunting experience for most of us, since he handles so many topics and cultural forms with such commanding authority. But there are through-lines in even the most disparate of Henry's writings and research projects. I hope today's Forum will help to identify this complicated coherence, which begins in part (I believe) in Henry's fierce loyalty to the aesthetic experiences and culture of his childhood and to his respect for the intelligence and creativity of children, gamers, fan communities, movie-goers, and so many others without credentials or official standing.

We'll never replace Henry Jenkins at MIT. But as these next two days of celebration and commemoration will demonstrate, he leaves enduring achievements behind. CMS will continue and extend his legacy. And let us be consoled as well by the expectation that he will return to MIT – and, I hope, to the Communications Forum – for many conversations in the future.

--David Thorburn