

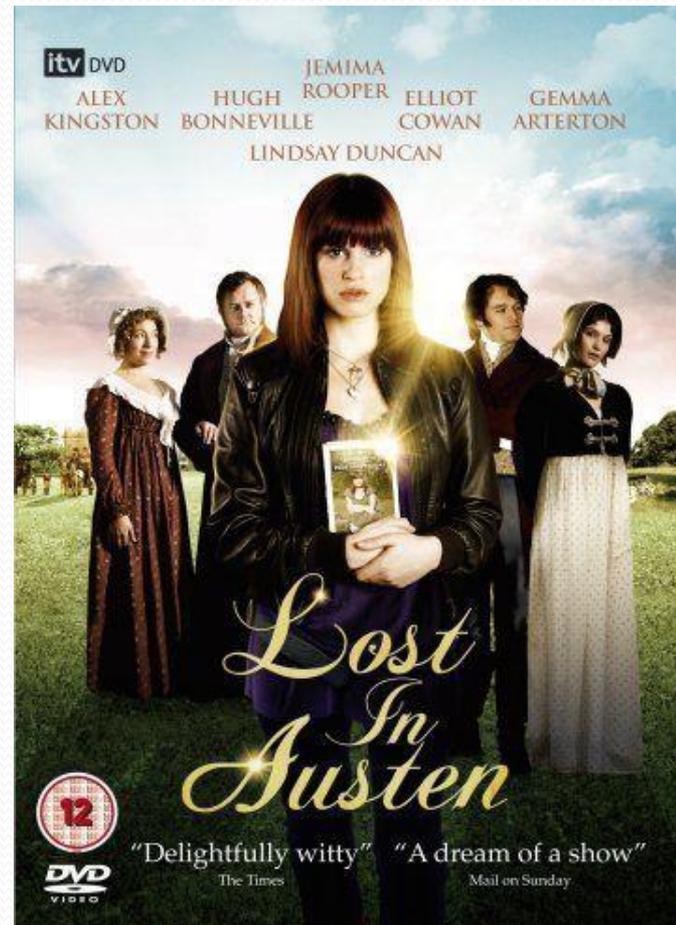


A Love That Spans All Ages?: Interrogating the
'Mainstream' Appeal of ITV1's *Lost in Austen*
(2008)

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Lost in Austen – Facts and Figures

- Broadcast on ITV1.
- Scheduled at 9pm on Wednesday evenings between the 3rd and 24th September 2008.
- Narrative premise:
 - ‘Temporal contrast’ (Burling 2006) scenario that complicates – yet combines with – narrative of *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen 1911)



Lost in Austen and ITV1

- Nelson (2007: 70) on production trends within UK commercial broadcasters during TVIII:
 - “the commercial channels in the UK – ITV and Five – are increasingly likely to seek volume rather than niche audiences and thus produce dramas with broad appeal. Whilst this does not preclude innovation, strong forces gravitate towards the “tried and tested with a new twist””

Lost in Austen and ITV1

- *Lost in Austen* immediately indicative of this?:
 - ‘Time travel’ motifs had an established popularity with audiences.
 - ‘Twist’ utilised by *Lost in Austen* identifiable as a strategy designed to maximise appeal to discourses of ‘mainstream’ popularity:
 - Costume drama has a proven track record for:
 - “an audience approaching ten million in the UK” (Nelson 2001: 38)
 - “an intense appeal to female viewers” (Higson 2004: 39)

Lost in Austen and Gender

- Gender-based target audience results in the series' time travel elements operating as an 'invisible intertext' (Hills 2005: 112-9) at the textual level...:
 - “Amanda Price ...‘pops’ into a stylised Regency setting alongside the central characters from *Pride and Prejudice* in her contemporary dress, now looking totally shocked.” (Ridout 2010: 14)
 - “The catalyst for the opening of the magical door is ...a desire to escape from the way life seems to be locking her into a dreary contemporary reality.” (Kaplan 2010: online)

Lost in Austen and Gender

- Despite its science fiction associations, *Lost in Austen* displays overt intertextual associations with female-targeted genres:
 - “*Lost in Austen* ...self-consciously adapts ‘chick lit’ by installing several key characteristics of that genre in its opening scenes—the urban single girl with a female flatmate, divorced mother, and disappointing boyfriend.” (Ridout 2010: 16)
 - Narrative resolution recodes ‘tried and tested’ SF elements use in *Life on Mars* (BBC/Kudos 2006-7) by placing them in a ‘chick lit’ framing.



Lost in Austen: Successful Strategies?

- Can the textual strategies employed in *Lost in Austen* be evaluated as successful?:
 - Ratings perspective - first-run broadcast averaged an audience of 3.59 million viewers.
 - Too generically broad?:
 - Serial includes overlaps with other ‘mainstream’ genres such as the sitcom.
 - “programs which are generically mixed, either through parody or fusion, ...face a particularly tumultuous cultural life, easily buffeted by competing contexts of reception” (Mittell 2004: 178).

Lost in Austen: Successful Strategies?

- A problem of scheduling?:
 - “The scheduling of classic-novel adaptations has altered little ...1990s adaptations [such as *Pride and Prejudice* (1995), *Moll Flanders* (1996) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1996)...were broadcast on Sunday evenings, although alternate episodes of *Moll Flanders* were transmitted on Monday evenings, allowing a rare escape from the traditional slot.” (Cardwell 2002: 82)
 - “ITV1 relaunched its evening schedule in January 2008. Under the new schedule, the weekends have been more focused on entertainment, with drama concentrated on weekday evenings.” (‘Driven by Content’ 2008: 20)

Conclusion

- *Lost in Austen* mobilised a number of ‘textual strategies’ designed to maximise the programme’s appeal to a range of female/mainstream audience tastes which involved playing down the programme’s ‘science fiction’ intertexts.
- The strategies employed for the series work demonstrate the tensions operating around the production of TV drama within commercial institutions – i.e. contradictions between textual strategies and scheduling.
- Absence of discussions of post-2005 telefantasy programmes produced by commercial broadcasters results in consideration of how appeals to mainstream and/or gendered audiences are sought out and targeted by these institutions.