

‘Amanda Price as author figure, fan and critical reader in *Lost in Austen* (ITV, 2008)’

Paper delivered by **James Zborowski** at *Viewer, I married him’: Reading (Re)Productions of the Long Nineteenth Century in Period Drama*, University of Hull, 29.6.2012.

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[Ask how many people have seen *Lost in Austen* - tell them I won’t assume everyone has seen *Lost in Austen* but will kind of and by necessity assume everyone has read *Pride and Prejudice*, or at least seen the 1995 BBC adaptation starring Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle.]

[Show ‘teaser’ segment of first episode.]

In 1993, scholar of British cinema Andrew Higson published a widely-read and influential piece called ‘Re-presenting the national past: nostalgia and pastiche in the heritage film.’ Drawing on the work of other scholars writing about the broader phenomenon of ‘the heritage industry’ in Britain at around the same time, Higson critiques a tendency he identifies in then-recent British cinema, exemplified by films like *Chariots of Fire* or *A Passage to India*. His critique is extensive and wide-ranging, but this quotation captures some key features. Higson wrote that, in the heritage film:

History, the past, becomes, in Fredric Jameson’s phrase, “a vast collection of images” designed to delight the modern-day tourist-historian. [...] In this version of history, a critical perspective is displaced by decoration and display, a fascination with surfaces, “an obsessive accumulation of comfortably archival detail” in which a fascination with style displaces the material dimensions of historical context.

Higson’s model, which he himself acknowledges owes something to simultaneous trends and developments on television, has since been extended to television drama. In her book *Adaptation Revisited*, published in 2002, Sarah Cardwell discusses the idea of

‘heritage cinema’ in relation to ITV’s 1981 adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited*. To take another prominent and pertinent example, the 1995 BBC *Pride and Prejudice* can certainly be profitably explored within the set of terms Higson lays out.

And what we’ve just seen of *Lost in Austen* seems, at the very least, not to actively challenge Higson’s schema. Although we *hear* about the pleasures of reading, we *see* the kinds of things we see in other heritage dramas: horse drawn carriages, formally attired men and women, dancing, stately homes and gardens. And the implicit critique of or turning away from the present that all this represents, a feature also brought out by Higson, is rendered explicit in *Lost in Austen*, when immediately after the titles sequence, the decorum of the past is contrasted with the present, in which Amanda, in her role as a customer service assistance, must deal with uncouth members of the public, and unwanted bodily contact with a fellow commuter or that potent symbol of contemporary rudeness, the hoodie. In fact, these opening minutes capture perfectly an observation made by Raymond Williams in one of the regular television columns he wrote for the *Listener* in 1969. Speaking of ‘Television’s intense propaganda of a noble past’, he observed that ‘the past is all art and buildings; the present all people and confusion.’

Amanda, then, starts out as a rhapsodic fan, and a willing consumer of heritage drama. However, via an intelligently deployed conceit, she becomes other things besides. Via the deliberately fantastical conceit of a magic portal that appears in the bathroom of her flat, Amanda is transported to the world of the novel of *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth Bennet, meanwhile, travels in the other direction. Through her interactions with the other members of Austen’s fictional world, Amanda comes to function as a Brechtian device. She becomes, I am going to argue, a means of forcibly reinserting an authorial and critical perspective upon events.

First of all, I need to lay out the key ways that *Lost in Austen*'s plot deviates from that of *Pride and Prejudice*. I'll briefly list them, in the order they occur. Amanda, despite her efforts to the contrary, first manages to attract Mr Bingley's attention towards herself, and away from Jane Bennet, with the result that, by the end of *Lost in Austen*'s second episode, Jane is married, oh horror of horrors, to a suitably repulsive Mr Collins. Bingley, realising his feelings for Jane too late, turns to drink. Appropriately, it's during a visit en masse to Pemberley - itself a slight departure from the novel - that, rather than the beneficence of the staid male hero being shored up, two of the female characters reveal unexpected sexual identities. Georgiana tells Amanda that Wickham did not seduce her, but that it was rather the other way round. Wickham, it turns out, has gone along with Georgiana's story so that Darcy does not cast her out. And Caroline Bingley makes a pass at Amanda, confiding in her that 'the poetry of Sappho is the only music that shall ever touch my heart.' In the final episode, Lydia elopes, not with Wickham, but with Bingley. I shall stop there, in case anyone who hasn't seen the series yet wants to watch it without knowing the ending.

Now, one might object to these changes on grounds other than purism. The revelation of Caroline's lesbianism is the change that I think comes the closest to being gimmicky, but its handling at least keeps titillation to a minimum. One might legitimately point out that whilst *Lost in Austen* goes some way to exploring the sexual politics of *Pride and Prejudice* and Jane Austen, it continues to ignore many of the 'material dimensions of historical context' that Higson suggests are lacking in heritage drama and that Edward Said, for example, has sought to draw out of Jane Austen. One might object on epistemological grounds and argue that the programme is doing the opposite of the Brechtian things I want to claim for it. It's mired in mimeticism, albeit of a strange sort. Suggesting that, in *Pride and Prejudice*'s fictional world, Georgiana *really* was the pursuer

and not the pursued might be of the same order of logic as asking questions such as ‘how many children had Lady Macbeth?’, or ‘what does Edward Hyde look like?’ Although of course, the line between legitimate inference on the basis of incomplete data and flights of fancy when reading fiction is always hard to draw, and the question of what a fictional world does and does not contain is a tricky one to answer. Nevertheless, I do still want to suggest that despite objections to and limitations of *Lost in Austen*’s handling of its conceit, it still does some pretty interesting stuff.

I want to begin my exploration by asking how Amanda stands in relation to events. We can begin to answer this question with the help of John Caughie. In his book about television drama, Caughie devotes a not-very-positive chapter to what he calls ‘the classic serial’, and the 95 BBC *Pride and Prejudice* is one of the prime exhibits for the prosecution. As part of his case, Caughie discusses the fate of the first line of *Pride and Prejudice* in ‘all recent adaptations’, that line of course being: ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.’ ‘In all recent adaptations’, Caughie observes,

this line has been preserved and assigned to Elizabeth Bennet. What happens when it is transferred from the narrator’s discourse to Lizzie’s? It assigns to Lizzie a knowledge of her social and historical situation, a knowledge which in the novel is shared between author and reader over the heads of the characters. A Lizzie who has the wit to know escapes at least some of the ironies of prejudice. In adaptation, characters become knowing and textual irony, the discourse of the narrator, becomes Elizabeth Bennet’s arch knowingness. The ironic trope of an embryonic modernism regresses historically into the wit of an earlier classicism.

In *Lost in Austen*, a version of the line, as you will have heard, is given to Amanda, as *her* very first line. ‘It is a truth, *generally acknowledged*, that we are all longing to escape.’ Not ideally critical perhaps, but there is not the same problem here in assigning in to Amanda as there is in assigning it to Lizzie, as Amanda, a little like Jane Austen, stands at one remove, at least, from the characters and milieu she is observing. And although Amanda employs direct confrontation where Jane Austen favours ironic implication, she still articulates, at various points during *Lost in Austen*, a critique of certain aspects of the conduct she observes. For example, she tells Caroline that ‘if just one of you said or did something that you actually meant, that had any kind of emotional integrity, the rest of you would die of fright.’

Amanda’s status as a stand-in for Jane Austen as well as Elizabeth Bennet forms part of the climax of the penultimate episode. Having already argued with Darcy when he finds out that she is a woman of experience, she returns to him and finds him reading the well-thumbed Penguin classics copy of *Pride and Prejudice* that we saw in the programme’s opening moments, and he asks her, ‘Is your name Price, or is it Austen?’

In keeping with her role as stand-in author, Amanda reacts with horror when her presence in the world of her beloved novel causes events to go so badly off the rails. She repeatedly exclaims, upon hearing of or witnessing the latest development, that, for example, Mr Collins is supposed to marry Charlotte, not Jane, or that Lydia is supposed to elope with Wickham, not Bingley, and she tries, as far as she can, to get events back on track. There’s a very effective mutual reinforcement in *Lost in Austen* between the constraints that Amanda feels as a woman when she is transported back to an early nineteenth century milieu, and the constraints that she feels due to her knowledge of how the story of *Pride and Prejudice* ought to unfold.

Of course, this impulse also stems from Amanda's status as a reader of the romance. In 1984, Janice Radway wrote her tremendous book, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. As part of an extremely intricate and multi-faceted analysis of the reading habits surrounding popular romantic fiction, Radway draws attention to the contradiction between women using the *act* of reading romantic fiction to demarcate privileged time for themselves, thus creating a rare escape from the demands of the home and its inhabitants, and the *content* of the books consumed. On the latter point, one of Radway's succinct formulations, added in the 1991 introduction to her book, is that

women who are experiencing the consequences of patriarchal marriage's failure to address their needs turn to a story that ritually recites the history of the process by which those needs are constituted.

Because it is conventional for romance stories to end with heterosexual romantic union, this is the ending to a story that readers will often expect, and actively desire, even if it means an end to the most desirable features of the story, and perhaps the beginning of the end of romance.

When the story material is as well known as *Pride and Prejudice*, the effect is even more interesting than this. In April 2003, the novel was second only to *Lord of the Rings* in the BBC's 'Big Read' poll to find the nation's favourite book. The 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* also casts a huge shadow, so much so that subsequent adaptations either consciously react against it, as in Joe Wright's deliberately 'grubby' cinematic adaptation starring Keira Knightley, or work with it, as does *Lost in Austen*. For example, Amanda has the BBC theme music as her mobile ringtone, and engineers a 'postmodern

moment' in which she gets her Darcy to emerge from the water in his underwear. The main point that I want to make is that *Pride and Prejudice* is a story that many, perhaps most, viewers, will approach a given adaptation of with a fair degree of mastery of the main contours of the source material. To return to Fredric Jameson for a moment, in his book *The Political Unconscious*, he suggests that 'texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations.' In the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, this is more directly and literally true than is usually the case.

For viewers who know the story, the pleasure therefore lies less in finding out what happens next than in finding out *how* this version handles the existing material. Will someone 'right' for the part of Darcy be chosen? How far will the sliminess of Mr Collins be pushed, and so on. That is, as part of the interesting overlap scholars have noted between adaptation and genre, much of the pleasure lies in seeing inflections of the familiar and the expected. I don't want to dismiss out of court or denigrate these pleasures. Nevertheless, it is probably fair to say that in the case of most Jane Austen adaptations, one does not go to them for radical departures from the known plots, nor expect surprises of that kind.

This is why it is so effective to ring the changes – precisely *because* the story material is so well known. To make Caroline Bingley a lesbian, or protolesbian, is perhaps a bit gimmicky. To allow Georgiana's story to be re-told from her own perspective, out of her own mouth, is interesting. And a knock-on effect of this is that Mr Wickham is no longer a villain, but a misunderstood, noble hero. Amanda believes that she knows all she needs to know about Wickham before he acts: he is condemned and pre-judged. When we view a straight adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, we are encouraged to treat Wickham in much the same way. But prejudgment, coming to a work already armed with all the answers, is

not a critical mode of viewing, nor is it what Jane Austen wanted to offer to her readers when she first wrote her stories. Such a mode of viewing eliminates, the ‘epistemic pause’, a feature of 19th century fiction that Caroline Levine has argued constitutes a valuable and ethical worldview and form of epistemological training.

Jane Austen was an advocate of complex vision, and the fine judgment. One reason that the past can feel easy and simple is that it’s presumed to be known; it’s not uncertain, like the unfolding present. Adaptations of known literary ‘properties’ can also feel safe for the same reasons. So when you pull the rug out from under the viewer, you create some interest effects.

By inserting an increasingly critical reader into its diegesis and by disrupting the smooth and seemingly inevitable glide of Austen’s elegant plotting, *Lost in Austen* finds the means of inserting and evoking the type of ‘critical perspective’ that Higson and others after him have suggested might often be in short supply in period or heritage drama. Amanda acts as a Brechtian device: her disruptive presence in the well-known world of *Pride and Prejudice* invites the viewer to pause over things that, in a different kind of adaptation, they might take for granted. The programme may have its limits, but it’s an interesting species of adaptation, with some progressive things to say.