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DEAR WHITE PEOPLE

How *Dear White People* Turns Texting and Twitter into Emotional Art

TV is still figuring out the best way to represent characters' digital lives on-screen, but Justin Simien's Netflix series is a stand-out.

by LAURA BRADLEY

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By Adam Rose/Courtesy of Netflix.

This post contains mild spoilers for *Dear White People* Season 2.

There's something intangibly special about those early stages in a relationship, when two people find themselves tethered together via an endless stream of text messages. There's the anxious peeking at the screen to see if a new one has arrived, the rush of a notification, and the cozy satisfaction of settling into a comfortable rhythm. In those early days, the world becomes a more peaceful version of itself—one in which the volume of everything else seems to be, at least temporarily, turned down to a murmur. But this special moment can pose a challenge for TV and film creators: how on earth do you translate that experience, a bizarre blend of circuitry and psyche, into something visual—something real? In its second season, *Dear White People* proves it's got the best answer to that question yet—and who better to delve into the topic than a series that's itself a part of that digital world?

Like actual college students, the show's characters are constantly oscillating between the physical world and the digital world—primarily via text messages and Twitter. Like *Jane the Virgin*, *Dear White People* usually uses on-screen text bubbles to show characters' messages to one another. Sometimes, though, its methods are more subtle: at one point, Lionel walks side by side through campus with his new beau, idly chatting. It's only as Lionel says, aloud, "TTYL" and a passerby walks in front of the camera that we realize their conversation wasn't happening IRL—instead, they were texting. According to *Dear White People* creator **Justin Simien**, the moment was inspired, in part, by scenes like one from the 2004 movie **Closer,** in which **Jude Law** and **Clive Owen** have an intimate (and deceptive) instant-message conversation.

In an interview, Simien said that the show is, at its core, about America and all the systems that underpin it—a heady idea that gets reflected in the way that the digital world interacts with the real world. "To be an American citizen is to be a part of this mass improv, and it can get confusing because you start to confuse the play for who you are," he said. "And that's compounded when you're part of a community that has been decided is less than. And so this idea of, there's a difference between your person and your persona was already in the DNA. . . . When we started to get into how that is being literally replicated in our digital lives, now we have a third persona or a fourth persona. My voice on Facebook is different than my voice on Instagram. So now I have eight personas, and I have to juggle them all."

The show emphasizes this concept with its focus on Twitter in the Second 2, where activism-driven Sam finds herself feuding with a troll called @AltIvyW for days on end. Even as she goes about her daily life, her enemy's presence repeatedly intrudes on her—with tweets hovering

on-screen, simultaneously representing the latest missives and the feud's intrusive presence in Sam's mind. Even if she's in class, this digital conflict is visually encroaching on her immediate surroundings. That, Simien said, was intentional.

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"The thing about Twitter is that when you're in your phone—yes, you're walking on the streets of New York—but mentally, you're actually someplace else," Simien said. "And so I just wanted to find a visual language for that: how do I show that they're here, but their mind is elsewhere, without cutting to a tiny screen every single time?"

In finding the answer to that question, *Dear White People* has found another way in which on-screen text can be used to deepen a story. Just as *Jane the Virgin* has used unsend text messages to explore how a fear of vulnerability can make us intentionally obscure ourselves from the ones we love, *Dear White People* shows how living through screens can effect our relations to one another—and ourselves. For Sam, whose identity is at least partially shaped by her status as a public figure, the line between persona and person is more blurred than most—which is why it can be so hard, throughout the season, for her to let those Web-based feuds go. At a time when many people live the majority of their lives staring at one screen or another, *Dear White People* is finding new ways to explore what that really means—from its own perch, on your device of choice.

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