



# THE EXPLODING GIRL

BRADLEY RUST GRAY, US

*The Exploding Girl* begins with a poem: a minute-long take of Ivy (Zoe Kazan) dozing in the passenger side of her ride home from college, the frictionless greenery of the windshield's reflection flowing over her indistinct features. It's a familiar superimposition, this image of unformed longing and troubled serenity, but director Bradley Rust Gray and DP Eric Lin's use of the HD 4K camera forgets the interceding pane of glass to unique effect, so that Kazan really does seem to swim in abstraction. In the film's second shot, Ivy greets Al (Mark Rendall), her childhood friend whose comforting presence is undiscussed. After telling him that her boyfriend Greg isn't visiting over break, Al looks away, a smile of opportunity warming his face.

We've drifted easily into the film's situation—school break, a wayward week for ambiguous feelings to surface and crack. When the two friends talk in the car, we never see the driver: their social bond is occlusive, though not so obviously as with Van Sant's dreamers. Ivy and Al are neither withholding nor indirect with one another—in a screwball, they'd be lapped in no time—but their sincerity doesn't thwart misplaced emotions. Dangling statements, a narrow depth of field, and prominently framed blurs of colour orbit the central, unanswerable question of adolescence: how to get from here to there? Gray's scripting is pleasingly concise, but the devotional concentration of his aural-visual design does the hard work of portraiture; he regards the face not just as an exterior, but as a way of seeing.

Thus, Kazan's slack, moony expression seems to be in the same key as the heavy-lidded New York summer air, which Gray conjures in all its ample allure. Like his wife and creative partner So Yong Kim, whose

*In Between Days* (2006) and *Treeless Mountain* (2008) give a fair sense of *The Exploding Girl's* padded subjectivity, Gray reveals his characters environmentally. For a film named after a pop song, he doesn't load up the soundtrack as an ersatz playlist. (Gray calls *The Exploding Girl* the b-side to Kim's debut, "The Exploding Boy" being the flip of the Cure's 1985 single, "In Between Days.") We know exactly where we are musically—pick your favourite descendent of the Velvet Underground's third album—but playing these songs would dilute phenomenological reverberations into mere tone. Music, when used, is indistinct thunder, part of the film's rapt shroud.

A caveat: Gray burrows so deeply into a thin band of emotional experience that away from the film's evocative spell, one may reasonably wonder whether it works as a story. Since Kazan is onscreen for nearly all of the film's 80 minutes, the question leads back to her character—or lack thereof. Whereas Al is bracketed with a warm range of goofy enthusiasms, mindful tenderness, and stoned blurs, Ivy's interests go unmentioned. In blanking the character to absorb her doldrums, Gray and Kazan run the risk that she's entirely defined by her breakup with Greg (relayed in an excruciating series of phone calls) and her epilepsy. This latter thread is introduced, awkwardly, with a brief scene at a doctor's office. Gray is typically much more subtle meting out details, and Ivy's condition is subsequently better worked into the rhythms of the film. After a party scene—a cliché given fresh life by Gray's fixed camera—she and Al shuffle through the bodega-lit night, stopping for a milkshake. The script remembers he's high: after a quick slurp, he asks, "Do you ever...Are you going to have babies?" She laughs,



but it doesn't stick. Her expression slides into contemplation, and after a few moments she explains that pregnancy will be complicated by "the medication and everything."

Gray is very good at bringing us into the unpredictable curves of conversations like these, and his two players aptly convey the searching underside of every question. But Ivy's epilepsy remains a clumsy device to consolidate emotional fragility. Kazan affects an interesting ambivalence in the character—her slowness could be dispositional or a precautionary measure—but as the eyedropper application of the condition narrows into anticipation of a seizure, it comes to seem a melodramatic conceit smuggled under cover of naturalism. Snarled in the literal, other cracks begin to show—the curious omission of anything to do with sex or money, for instance.

But it would be miserly to discount *The Exploding Girl's* poetry for its plot points. The coming-of-age story is hoary with cliché, but that's never the character's sense of it—Gray's camera elucidates the shuttered, amazed sensitivity of the 20-year-old. Shooting interiors, he avoids master shots and is highly selective in his attention. With whole scenes often kept to one or two long takes, the compositions are open but purposeful. The patient camera set-ups nod to Hou Hsiao-hsien, especially, as Gray admits, to *Café Lumière* (2003): a scene in which Ivy and Al track down the former location of one of Tesla's labs, echoing Yoko and Hajime's haunted pursuit of Taiwanese composer Jiang Wenye, clinches the frequent quotes of doorway framings and translucent subways.

*The Exploding Girl* is most distinct on the avenue, where Gray often takes advantage of a layered sound design and HD lensing to shoot his single-take scenes from a block away. As with Helen Levitt's photographs or Varda's *Cléo*, a character's situation seems to tumble out of the particularities of the street. Consider the way Gray dodges contrivance with Greg and Ivy's breakup call, a scene we're expecting within seconds of the opening credits. There are more than a dozen

cell phone conversations during *The Exploding Girl*, most of them of little consequence (what better illustration of trouble communicating than calling to say "I'm downstairs?"). For the breakup, Gray makes smart dramatic use of the way cell phones bring private conversations into public—*The Conversation* (1974) as commonplace. We watch Ivy from across the street as she picks up her phone in midday sun. Pedestrians busy the frame; ambient sounds crowd the call. Ivy jogs to the median strip so that cars pass on either side of her. A siren screams by, interrupting the already strained talk (a good filmmaker's luck). Greg breaks the news as Ivy stands perfectly still amidst the cross-sections of movement, her silence spread across seconds. The street remains itself while doubling as a psychological stage—everything that she's blocking out is so clear in this moment. Our ability to eavesdrop and maintain a distanced view may seem like the height of voyeurism, but Gray's vivid framing realizes a surprising degree of empathy with the character.

The breakup is the crease of *The Exploding Girl's* narrative, but Gray's formal attentiveness is no dramaturgical highlighter. Moments of recognizable crisis and mere uncertainty are lacquered with the same aura of significance. In two lovely, ostensibly plot-less scenes of Ivy and Al in a park, for instance, the duration of shots is closely affixed to the characters' pounding hearts, each cut accenting a barely perceptible suggestion of vulnerability. The film ends with a romantic gesture so minor, so innocent that it can hardly be called a resolution. Back in the car, at the end of break, Ivy and Al find the eloquence with their hands that has been so slow coming in words. They are presumably soon to part ways for their universities, but the aching surrender of this passing moment counts. Gray relinquishes the tripod here, doubling the intimate gesture. Ivy's eyes open, and her life, no less, is suddenly here 🍷

—Max Goldberg

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